Fanta
ROLL THE DICE

Roll the DICE!

an unofficial Danganronpa fanzine

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FOREWORD.

Thank you so much for purchasing this zine and supporting us! This zine was created to show and share our love for Kokichi Ouma and his organization, and now, almost a year later, we'd like to think we've succeeded in doing that! An entire zine dedicated to a secret organization shrouded in mystery and darkness... Don't you just want to learn more about these clowns?

This has been an extremely fun journey filled with lots of laughs and organized chaos with our amazing lineup of contributors. We were truly blessed with such a great team of our very own DICE members and we hope that you enjoy this zine as much as we did creating it!

On behalf of the *Roll the DICE!* Mod team, thank you!

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@spirits_our

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Finder's Keepers — 19 - 24

written by Hope, illustrated by Celchuno

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Tamaya~! — 30 - 36

written by Ixcarus, illustrated by Karu

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Operation: Hope's Peak Break-In! — 52 - 57

written by Mimca

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CW : Very Minor Depictions of Blood and Violence

A Beginner's Guide to Successfully Poaching Talent — 62 - 68

written by Bean

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A Bin of Lost (and Important) Things that Desperately Need Sorting — 74 - 78

written by Kohi-Anubis

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The Phantom's Theorem — 84 - 90

written by Mamichigo

CW : Implied/Referenced Past Child Abuse

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Operation: EuryD.I.C.E.! — 96 - 101

written by thatsrightdollface

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CW : Major Character Death (Don't Worry, It Isn't Permanent), Spiders and Snakes

A New Emotion Called "Hope" — 106 - 112

written by themaybelltree

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Island — 130 - 136

written by Rovelae

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CW : Dissociation, Mentions of In-game Violence, Mentions of Restricted Eating Due to Trauma, Handcuffs

Hello Dystopia — 142 - 149

written by Artemis

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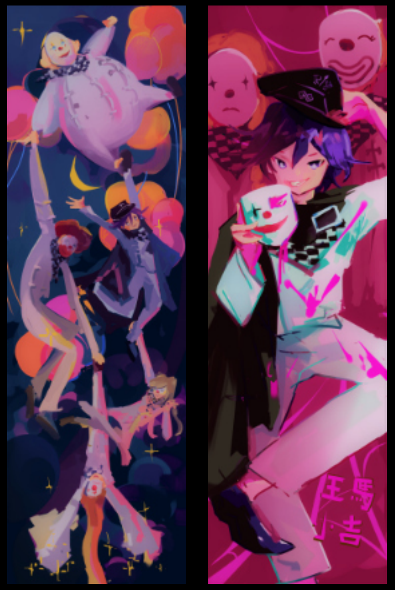

aisudoki

@aisu.ki
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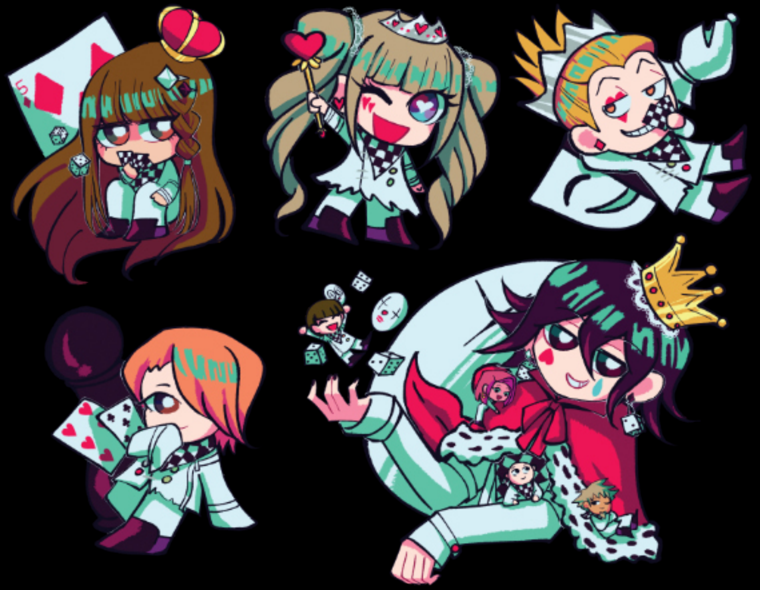

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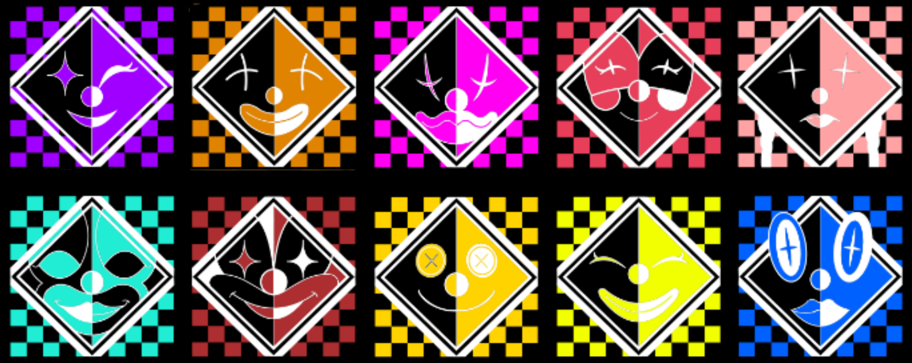

Lledó

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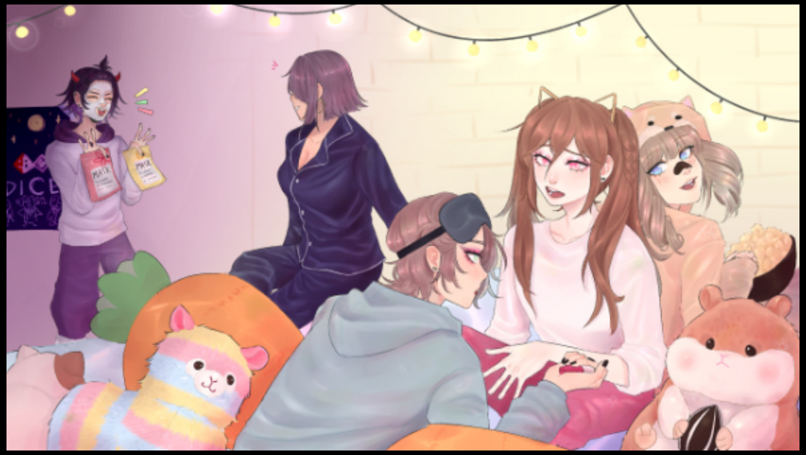

Mengiao

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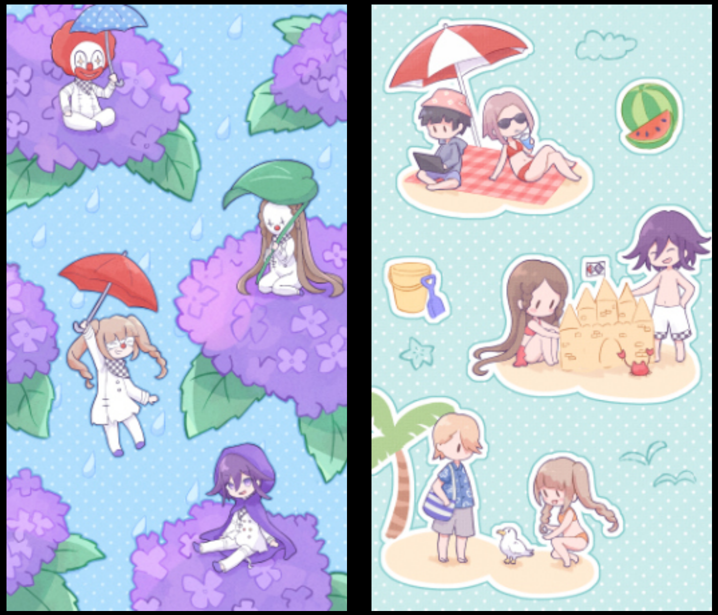
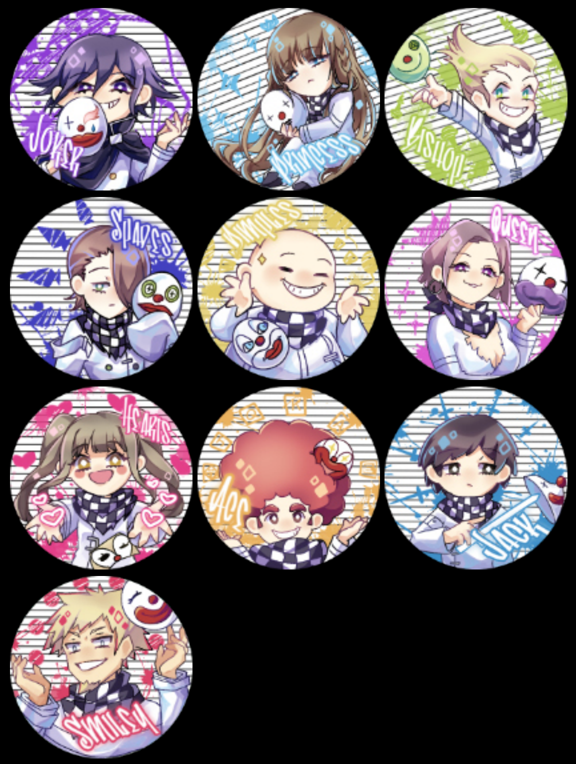
@_mengiao



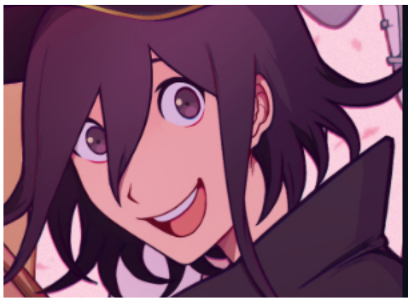
Rhemy

@rhemydraw



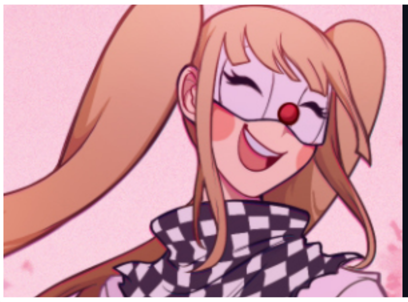
Suitan

@Suitanart
@suitanart



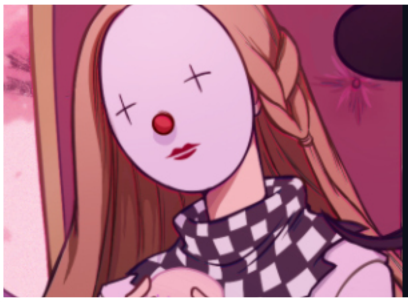
CODENAME: Joker

FULL NAME: Kokichi Ouma



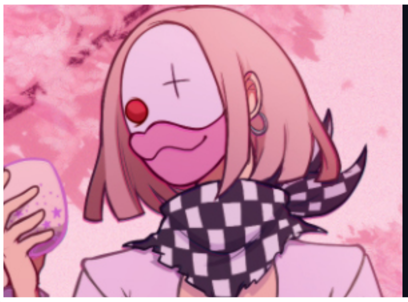
CODENAME: Hearts

FULL NAME: Himari Kaneko



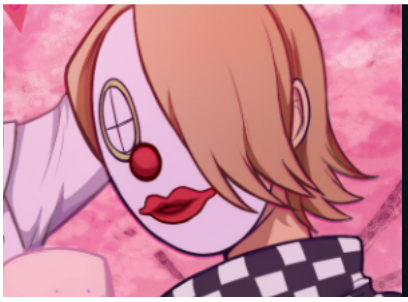
CODENAME: Princess

FULL NAME: Megumi Kogane



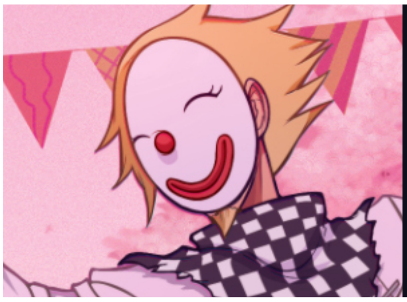
CODENAME: Queen

FULL NAME: Mayumi Mizuho



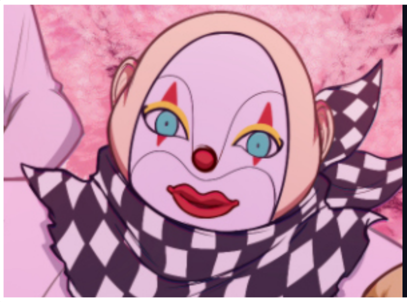
CODENAME: Spades

FULL NAME: Tsubasa Hidaka



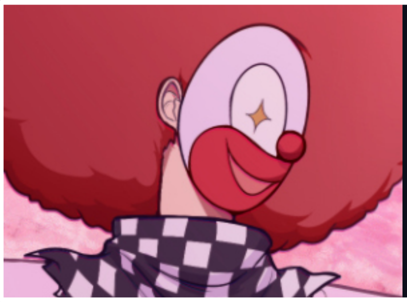
CODENAME: Smiley

FULL NAME: Ryuu Katsura



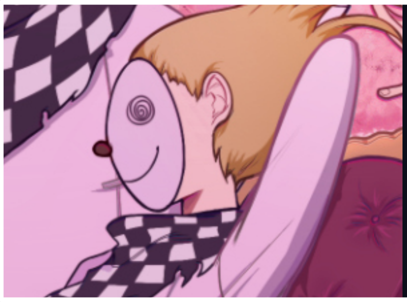
CODENAME: Dimples

FULL NAME: Youta Hyodo



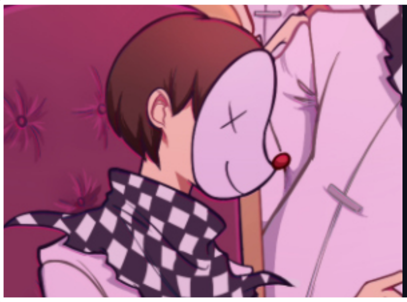
CODENAME: Ace

FULL NAME: Daichi Kubo



CODENAME: Bishop

FULL NAME: Daisuke Hasumi

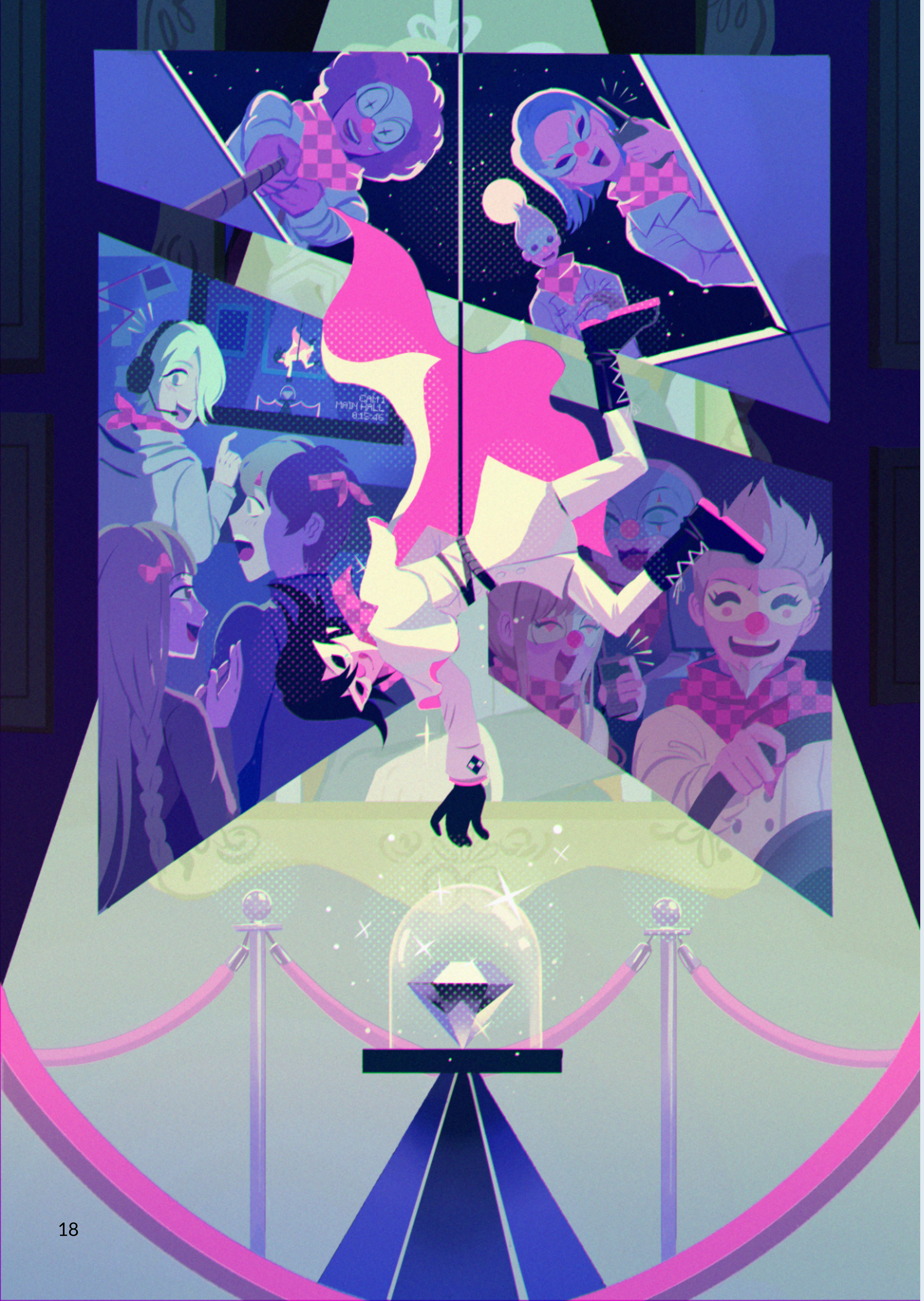


CODENAME: Jack

FULL NAME: Reo Shirogane

UGLY?
Despair Sip
WE RULE THE WORLD
DICE WAS HERE
PANTA

DICE



Finder's Keepers

Written by Hope ♦ Illustrated by Celchuno

Ever since a wrongful accusation by the police, Ouma and DICE have made their living by setting out to beat them at their own game: solving crimes as a private detective agency. Unfortunately, business has been pretty slow, and it hardly pays the best. So when a mysterious phantom thief leaves an advance notice of their next heist, they can hardly pass up the opportunity to beat them to the chase and snatch it out from under everyone's noses. After all, it's just safe-keeping, right?

THEIR SO-CALLED "DETECTIVE AGENCY" looks more like a broom closet.

No exaggeration, it really does. In theory, and under the right circumstances, the place shouldn't be *too* small: it was spacious as far as offices went, and even included a separate bathroom and a small kitchenette in the far corner. Really, as a start-up venture for a private investigator only just now beginning to take up cases on his own, it wasn't so bad.

But there was no way in hell it was equipped to hold ten people at once.

Add in the fact that the office had to be partitioned near the entryway to leave room for a makeshift "waiting area" for potential clients, and the whole office was practically standing-room-only.

As he trips and stubs his toe on a nearby box of papers, Kokichi Ouma thinks to himself that they *really* should limit the amount of people allowed in the office at one time. They should, but of course, it's not like any of his "part-time staff" (see: lazy bums) would really listen.

Kaneko-chan must know exactly what he's thinking, because he hears her giggle behind him the moment his toe hits the box. He turns around to shoot her a look, and although he was aiming for icy and intimidating, he probably lands somewhere closer to halfway-irritated at best because she looks completely unrepentant.

She just brushes his irritation aside and gracefully dodges the maze of boxes on the floor, her twintails bouncing all the while. With a wink, the girl passes him a cup of coffee over the heads of at least three other part-timers, somehow without spilling a drop.

It's devoid of any cream or sugar, blacker-than-the-abyss coffee, and has probably been sitting in the pathetic excuse for an electric coffee percolator they keep in the kitchenette for the better half of a day—nasty as all hell, in other words. Exactly the way he hates his coffee.

Ouma takes a sip and purses his lips almost immediately. "Thanks, Kaneko-chan."

"No problem-o, boss!"

As it turns out, he can't afford to pass up the caffeine, no matter how horrible it tastes. He downs about half of the muddy black coffee in one gulp as he turns his attention back to the corkboard that dominates the center of the room, taking up whatever fraction of space might've remained in the office otherwise.

"Could you have possibly taken a blurrier photo?" Hidaka-chan puts a hand on his hip, looking thoroughly unimpressed as he leans in closer to examine the (admittedly grainy) photograph on the board. "I think it could stand to be blurrier. Maybe take a photo of a photo next time, and *then* we'll really get somewhere."

There's another giggle from Ouma's right, from yet another one of his traitorous part-timers. Hasumi-chan throws his hands behind his head and shoulders past the other boy to take a look for himself, oblivious to the fact that his ridiculous hairstyle is now blocking part of the board from view. "Dunno about that, Hidaka. I think boss outdid himself with the blurriness, personally. This is record-breaking stuff."

"No thanks to you two," Ouma says, pausing only to down another quarter of the remaining coffee-sludge. "Sneaking a peek at official police documents isn't easy, y'know. Buy me more time than a measly thirty seconds and then you can complain about my crappy photography all you want."

Tall and graceful, Mizuho-chan is the only one of them who somehow looks right at home even among all the clutter. She tucks a hand under her chin as she quirks a dubious eyebrow. "Why did we settle on calling this place 'DICE,' anyway? I thought we were supposed to be a 'Detective something-something Enterprise,' but you all make it sound like we're running some sort of crime ring."

"The C stands for 'Clowns,' not 'Crime,' actually. Because that's what you all are as far as I'm concerned." Ouma corrects her and finishes the last of the god-awful poison in his mug, then shoves it precariously onto the top of a pile of boxes behind him. Maybe someone else would come knocking it over in ten minutes time, but that was a *them* problem.

"You flatter us, boss." Kubo-chan's voice is deep, thoughtful—and undoubtedly holding back a laugh. "Maybe we should change the C to 'Circus,' for good measure."

Those words break the last of their self-control, and the whole room fills with laughter, rambunctious and messy and all-too-familiar. It's not at all suited for this cramped, messy office with its low-hanging ceiling and creaky floorboards, but it's the same sound that's followed the ten of them in all of their endeavors, no matter where they go. Ouma hopes it'll never change. He indulges them all for a minute or two before finally pushing past the ring of his lazy, laughing co-conspirators until he's got a clear view for himself of the photo pinned to the corkboard.

It *is* a shitty photograph, there's no getting around that, but parts of the note that it displays are still legible enough to read—most importantly, the words *TOGAMI FAMILY EXHIBITION*, underlined several times in thick, heavy pen. The police had already been scratching their heads over this particularly blatant little advance notice before he'd slipped into the station and managed to take a photo while none of them were looking.

But if they were stumped as to why a thief would leave such an obvious notice of their next heist, or what to do next, that was entirely on them. Ouma has no intentions of solving this case for their sake—the police have never done him or his friends any favors, after all.

…No, that wasn't entirely true. The only favor the police had ever done him was giving him a reason to want to prove how useless they were, to lead them by the nose and make them look stupid in front of everyone else.

If they hadn't accused Hidaka-chan of murder that fateful day three years ago (if Ouma hadn't decided to look into the case himself, to snoop around and ask questions until he found enough evidence to prove that Hidaka-chan hadn't even been in that alley, let alone killed anyone), then they probably wouldn't all be standing in this cramped and dingy detective agency right now.

So he's not poring over this case in order to help the cops—though making them look like idiots will almost certainly be a sweet reward in its own right. And he's definitely not doing it to make a profit either, because if there's one thing he would've loved to know before he had invested in the lease on this place, it was that private detectives did *not* make a lot of money.

If he had to put a finger on why he and everyone else would waste so much time looking into a case as messy, risky, and confusing as this one, it was probably the same reason as nearly everything else they'd ever done in their lives: for the thrill of it.

✦ ✦ ✦

"So that's the answer, then? The whole note was just a way for them to misdirect the police's attention?" Katsura-chan scratches the back of his head from his seat on the floor, his gangly legs tucked awkwardly underneath him to make more space for the others to sit as well.

A little less than two hours since they'd all begun poring over the corkboard and its photograph of the mysterious, encrypted letter, Ouma and the others had finally managed to crack the code—though what should have been something of a victory had for some reason only left them feeling less than celebratory.

The note really was an advance notice of a heist, just like they'd expected. But contrary to those expectations, it only seemed to regard one priceless piece of art in particular rather than the entire Togami family exhibition. The rest of the exhibition had been alluded to and underlined in multiple places to throw the police off and buy the would-be thief more time to snag the painting for themselves, no doubt.

All in all, it wasn't a half-bad scheme. But…

"…It's a little anticlimactic, isn't it?" Kogane-chan's mournful question catches them all by surprise. She'd been almost completely silent for the entire afternoon, sitting quietly on the floor with her knees pulled up to her chest while the rest of them went back and forth. It was a little too easy to forget that she was there at all, sometimes.

Quiet or not though, Ouma can't say she's wrong. *Anticlimactic, hmm…?* That did seem to fit the lethargic mood that had settled over them ever since they'd cracked the code.

"It's a bit of a letdown," Hyodo-chan agrees, crossing his arms. His huge frame and jovial-looking face seem more-suited to stand-up comedy than they are for the solemn nod he gives the tiny girl while perched atop one of the only chairs in the office that still had all four of its legs. "I think we were expecting it to be… a little more fun. Or at least to take a little longer to solve."

As one of the people in the room still closest to the corkboard, Hidaka-chan gives it another long, hard look before waving a dismissive hand. "That's *if* we even decoded it correctly. I think you're giving the boss a little too much credit, here—this photo still looks way too grainy to make out almost anything, if you ask me."

Those words are clearly meant to provoke a reaction from him; they'd known each other for so many years by this point that Hidaka-chan had become increasingly more sly at nudging the conversation along like this. Well, he wasn't Ouma's second-in-command at Deadbeat Investigators' Crime Expertise for nothing.

Despite knowing fully well what his colleague (and arguable co-conspirator) was up to, Ouma doesn't mind: he goes ahead and takes the bait anyway. Maybe it would help pull the rest of them out of the heavy funk that had settled in the room. "I get *no* respect in this household, honestly. It's like you guys have no faith that I'll make this fun for us!"

"Uh, it's not a household, boss. It's a rental office."

Ouma ignores Kubo-chan's correction with a roll of his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. You all didn't really think we'd just crack the code and turn everything over to the police, did you? Where's the fun in that?"

It only takes a moment for the meaning behind his words to sink in; everyone straightens up a little, suddenly looking far more interested in whatever he has to say about the next step in their so-called investigation.

"…You have something else in mind, don't you, boss?" Despite her usual sleepy drawl, even Kogane-chan sounds a lot more interested in where this is going now—which, of course, is exactly the sort of reaction he was hoping to get.

Ouma skirts around the boxes on the floor and unpins the photograph from its position on the corkboard, waving it almost tauntingly in front of the rest of them. "Look, this is a detective agency, right?" He asks.

Mizuho-chan quirks an eyebrow. "In theory," she says.

Hardy-har, Ouma thinks, but he chooses to ignore the sarcasm for now. "And what are detectives supposed to do—collect evidence, right?"

Leo-chan's rounded baby-face lights up with surprise as he catches on to the implication behind those words just a moment before some of the others do. "Wait, so… d'you mean…?"

Ouma's face splits into a wide, self-satisfied smirk. "Even if we told the police everything we put together, it's not like they'd believe us, right? So personally, I think it's better if we… go and *collect* the evidence, before our mysterious phantom thief beats us to it. For safe-keeping, of course."

✦ ✦ ✦

Ouma's plan to out-steal the thief they were trying to catch was perhaps the most reckless, impulsive thing he had suggested to the lot of them. Or at least, it was up there with his idea to start their detective agency from the ground up in the first place.

So of course, everyone had been on-board with it almost immediately.

He had to hand it to them, they really didn't need a lot of convincing. The nine of them were normally so different from one another, their personalities ranging from loud and boisterous, to shy and withdrawn, but somehow they always found themselves on the same page when it came to something like this. Ouma suspects that they might actually follow him to the ends of the earth, as long as he promised them all that it'd be interesting enough.

Granted, he's not really any different. Starting a detective agency from scratch had been fun enough in the beginning, but discovering that most of the real work came down to the same old mind-numbing, menial cases of cheating spouses and lost pets had made most of the novelty wear off fast. At this point, all he really wants is a change of pace—anything will do, as long as it keeps the boredom at bay.

...Which is, of course, how he finds himself atop the roof of the National Art Center in the heart of Tokyo later that night, ready to steal the crowning piece of the Togami family's prized jewel exhibit right out from under everyone's noses. The building snakes beneath him and the others who came with him up here, curling in on itself gently like a wave against the downtown sky.

The whole plan sounds completely insane—Ouma's aware of that, but at this point he and the rest of his little agency had already committed to said insanity so there was no chance of backing out now.

The cool night air is a little too sharp in his lungs as he takes in a breath, and all he can absentmindedly wonder is whether the ropes will hold when he goes in through the skylight in a few more minutes. They were heavy duty stuff, supposedly: professional-grade rock climbing equipment with a breaking strain of up to a thousand pounds. Considering Ouma weighed barely a tenth of that, it ought to hold.

…It ought to, right? *Hmm…*

"No need to worry, boss. These ropes are gonna hold no matter what you do." Kubo-chan's voice shakes him from his train of thought. "I've got some rock climbing experience, actually, so I can vouch."

"That's 'Joker' to you, Ace." The only thing Ouma hated more than boredom was being read like an open book, so he compensates by correcting his partner-in-crime instead. From here on out, it was crucial that they stick to codenames-only—all the moreso considering how ridiculously silly most of those codenames were. "And really? You're telling me *you* used to go mountain climbing?"

"Nah. You know those little rock climbing stations you pass by in the mall sometimes? I worked at one of those for a while."

Ouma smiles blithely and tries not to ponder how hard he's going to *splat* all over the pristine wooden floor of the museum. "How reassuring."

There's a low chuckle to his left as Mizuho-chan finishes inspecting the glass skylight. She stands up straight and crosses her arms, looking every bit as regal as her new codename, and although she's already wearing her mask, Ouma somehow knows she's smirking at him. "Y'know, Joker, you might feel a little more reassured if you actually wore your harness *over* your clothes instead of underneath them. Just a thought."

"I swear, Queen," he says, "it's like you have no appreciation for showmanship at all."

"Showmanship?" She lifts a hand to the mouth of her mask as though she's surprised, or maybe holding back a laugh. "And here I thought we were detectives, not actual thieves."

He rolls his eyes, though he has to admit that the back-and-forth banter has taken the edge off his nerves—which had probably been Mizuho-chan's plan all along, now that he thinks about it. Really, he's almost proud. "We're here as art *conservateurs*. It's all about getting in-character, Queenie, dear."

"Yeah well, you'd better start getting in-character real quick, Joker." Hasumi-chan finally sidles away from his spot near the edge of the roof, walkie-talkie clutched firmly in one hand. "Spades says they've just about made it inside."

While Mizuho-chan and Kubo-chan had handled most of the setup for the climbing equipment, Hasumi-chan had been in charge of establishing communications with the other groups: Katsura-chan was on getaway duty along with Kaneko-chan and Hyodo-chan, but most important of all was Hidaka-chan's group headed for the surveillance room.

This whole plan was kind of a bust if they got caught right away, after all, and it was crucial that they have someone stationed on the inside to give them information. If Hidaka-chan and the others had almost finished worming their way in through the entrance reserved for cleaning staff, then it really was about time for him to get ready.

Ouma inhales another too-sharp breath of nighttime air—it's far too clean than inner-city Tokyo air has any right being, but it's great for clearing his head, so who's he to complain? He slides his own mask into place over his eyes and gets into position near the base of the skylight. Once Mizuho-chan starts cutting, he'll only have so long to go down and get that painting.

Despite the noise of the city beneath them, it's far too quiet while they wait. "Did Spades tell you anything else?" Ouma asks, pressing Hasumi-chan for more details.

"Uhh…" The taller boy hesitates. "He said not to worry too much about going splat, even if you're scared of heights. Said that we'll all come bust you out of the hospital later if you get caught 'cause you were crying."

"Did he, now?" Ouma narrows his eyes, flashing an unpleasant smile Hasumi-chan's way. "Well, you tell Spades that he can shove that walkie-talkie up his—"

Kubo-chan cuts him off before he can finish, his big hands patting him on the shoulder in what was probably meant to be a placating gesture. "Now, now, Joker. I'm sure what Spades meant to say is not to worry, 'cause if anything goes wrong, we'll get you out of there in a hurry—same as we always have. Isn't that right?"

He hardly needs a reminder that Hidaka-chan, Kubo-chan, and Mizuho-chan have been picking up the little pieces of their group long before most of the other members had even joined them. Three years ago, before Hidaka-chan had been put on trial for a crime he didn't commit, it used to just be those three, and himself. Everyone else had come along shortly after that, crossing paths with them one by one until they'd eventually wound up where they were now, all ten of them crowded together in a room that was entirely too small to fit them.

So, it's true. If anything were to happen, those three would probably come along and keep things from falling apart, just like they always had. No matter how much they liked to tease, or give each other a hard time, they always had each other's backs. That was DICE, for you: Dumbasses Intending to Check on Everyone.

Hasumi-chan startles abruptly as the walkie-talkie in his hands buzzes, almost fumbling it before he holds it up to his ear. He listens to what they have to say on the other end of the line, and then, for some inexplicable reason, he nods, apparently forgetting that Hidaka-chan and the others couldn't possibly see his reaction to their words. "I'll let Joker know," he says, before straightening back up.

Ouma already has a pretty good idea of what he's going to tell him. Despite having no real way to tell whether they'll hold up or not, he double-checks the carabiners attached to the harness under his vest one more time, just for good measure.

"Hey bo—uh, Joker. Spades just gave the okay for Queen to start cutting through the skylight. As soon as she's done, he says count to ten and then jump."

For the first time all night, Mizuho-chan's face splits in an ear-to-ear grin as she kneels to take the glass cutter out of the duffel bag by her feet. "Y'know," she says, "I thought we'd never get to the fun part."

◆

As it turns out, he doesn't go splat on the museum floor.

Of course he doesn't. As theatrical as this entire charade might be, it's not like it's a *movie*; he doesn't recklessly fall through the hole in the skylight or swing precariously like Tarzan on a vine. Instead, he's gradually lowered into the room bit by bit, until he finally comes to a stop right above the crown jewel of the Togami family's collection.

Up above him, no one says a word, but he still spares a glance for the three figures holding on to the ropes that he's dangling from—and then, sticking his tongue out, he flashes them what he hopes is a reassuring thumbs up. *Everything down below a-okay, now let's steal this rock and get the hell out of here.*

The "rock" in question is almost as big as his head, or perhaps a little bigger, even. Not for the first time, Ouma finds himself sympathizing deeply with the gentleman thief who'd wanted to steal such a large and ostentatious stone in their tiny little advance notice. Those filthy-rich people were hardly using it for anything if they had it locked up in a glass case. And hey… as long as they weren't hurting anyone, right?

Of course, he could hardly just *let* them steal it and get away with it. He's a detective, after all—and doing it this way is bound to be a lot more fun.

In one swift motion, Ouma snatches the glass case up with one gloved hand and snags the diamond with the other. By the time the first alarms start splitting the air of the empty museum hall, he's already pocketed the diamond, slammed the case back down again, and tugged twice at the rope up above him: their agreed-on sign to get him the hell out of there.

Going back up the skylight turns out to be a *lot* faster than going down was. All three of the figures on the roof pull him up immediately, resulting in a swift and sudden ascension that would've left him with a sense of vertigo if he weren't laughing so hard the whole time.

It was a lot like flying, really. He could even get used to this kind of work.

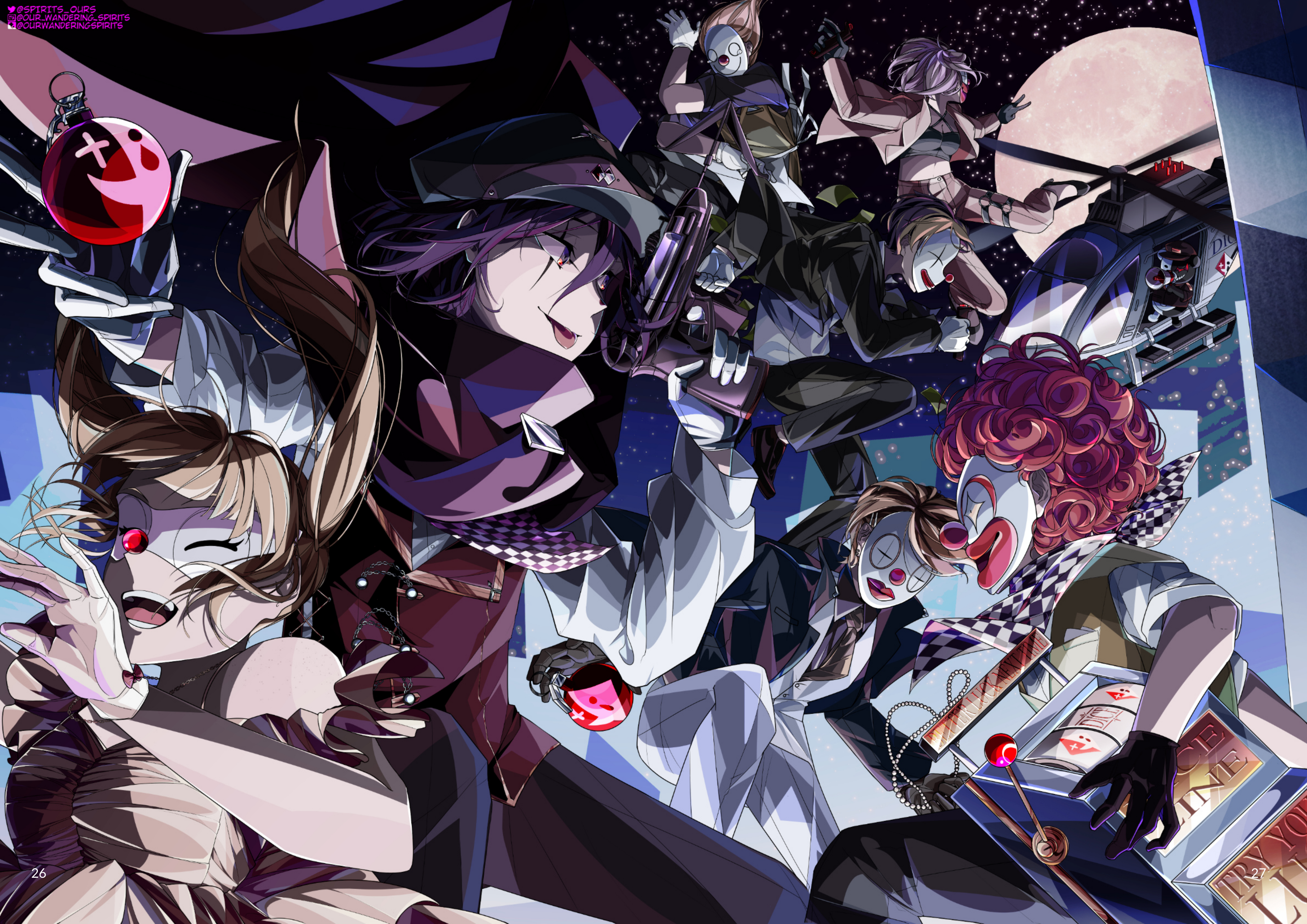
Ouma's still laughing by the time they've rappelled down the side of the building and squeezed past Kaneko-chan and Hyodo-chan into the backseat of Katsura-chan's getaway car. He can hardly even hear Hidaka-chan as he, Leo-chan, and Kogane-chan come flying into the passenger seat, yelling *go, go, go* at the top of their lungs.

Katsura-chan doesn't waste any time: the car jerks into motion like a startled animal and they begin tearing their way up the street, putting as much distance between them and the museum as possible.

Brushing his hair out of one eye, Hidaka-chan turns from the front seat to look back at him with a look halfway between curiosity and amusement, like he was trying hard not to laugh himself. "Please tell me that after all that, you actually got what we came here for."

"Of course." As he grabs the diamond from the inside of his vest to show the rest of them, Ouma feels not entirely unlike a magician showing the audience how he performed his best trick yet. And a wave of sudden inspiration hits him. "They don't call us 'Dodging Incarceration, Collecting Evidence' for nothing, you know."

There's a brief moment of silence at that—before the whole car reverberates with the sound of ten people laughing.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TAMAYA~!

Written by Ixcarus ♦ Illustrated by karu

It’s Himari’s birthday, which means DICE is going all out… and visiting the local summer festival to celebrate! There’s so much to look forward to— fun stall games, delicious street snacks, and of course, fireworks in the night.

It’s not like DICE got banned from all existing waterpark establishments and caused a thousand dollar’s worth of damages the last time they went out to ‘have fun’ or anything…

Kokichi isn’t worried at all. What could possibly go wrong?

“**ALRIGHT GUYS, HERE’S RULE** number one for today: *no masks.*”

Kokichi Ouma accents his last two words with a decisive clap, staring down at the rest of DICE from a little podium. And, well, maybe said podium is just a cardboard box they found by the ice cream parlor they raided last week— and maybe he still has to look up a bit to properly make eye contact with Daichi and Youta while they’re standing— and *maybe* he’s wearing a purple glitter party hat upon Megumi’s insistence— but still. He likes to think he can be pretty intimidating when he wants to be.

Unfortunately, everyone else seems to think otherwise. Daisuke and Ryuu are playing checkers in the corner, with Mayumi placing bets over their shoulders. Tsubasa fidgets with a broken wind-up toy he found by the side of the road yesterday, tongue sticking out in concentration. Megumi seems to be playing some game on her phone, mindlessly tapping at her screen while Himari chatters behind her about something or the other.

With a huff, Kokichi’s eyes sweep over to the only person who seems to be paying attention; Reo waves at him, lips stretched with a faux politeness.

Kokichi scowls in return, once again clapping his hands together. “Hellooooo people? Your *leader* is speaking to you! I-Is this how I’m treated by my loyal subjects? You g-guys are so *ME*—”

“Alright, alright, we get it Joker,” Mayumi interrupts before Kokichi can burst into tears. She glances up from the checkerboard, giving Kokichi a raised eyebrow. “What’s the reason for a stupid rule like that anyways?”

As if he had expected the question, Kokichi spreads his arms dramatically and gives a sharp, knowing grin in return. “I’m so glad you asked, Queen. It’s because… well, the masks are for heists! And *crimes*. But we’re not going to the summer festival for anything like that.”

A pause, then. His voice goes low, serious, and there’s a part of him that’s surprised by how steady he sounds. “We’re going to the summer festival today to celebrate Himari’s birthday. So no funny business, and *no masks*. You guys can think of it as a day off for DICE, if you want.”

There’s a moment of silence as Kokichi’s words settle. Everyone seems to slow, frozen in consideration, and there’s an unspoken weight that hangs onto the atmosphere—

Until Reo lets out a barely suppressed snort.

“Are you sure it isn’t because our masks were on the news just a week ago—no thanks to a certain detective that may or may not go to the same school as you, by the way—and if we wear them we might be banned from entering the festival?” Reo intones, tilting his head with an innocent look—one that’s far too practiced to be real.

“Reo, shut *up*,” Kokichi bites back. Reo’s smile just widens in response, and like a machine being kicked back to life, DICE resumes moving.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.” Ryuu kicks his feet onto their coffee table. “What were we even doin’ in that photo?”

“I don’t know, ya think any of us remember the shit we did a week ago?” Daisuke says, playing with the strands of his hair. “...I bet it was Ryuu’s fault, though.”

“*Hey*, I resent that.”

Daichi clears his throat from the side, an apologetic look on his face. “Look, Joker. I know you’re probably just worried for us, like you always are—”

“I’m not worried about anything, ever.” Kokichi interrupts hotly.

“—But I’m sure it’ll all be fine, today!” Daichi says, undeterred.

The words are meant to be reassuring, but Kokichi feels something in his stomach sour even further. An erratic impulse to call it all off rises from the back of his throat. It’d be much better to indulge in something more familiar, he thinks. Something he’s sure won’t go wrong.

Because DICE is supposed to be fearless, raucous, *confident*. A ragtag group of orphans making their mark upon the world, always wreaking havoc and causing mayhem. He can’t quite remember the last time they went out to just… relax. No tricks, no Supremely Evil plans to implement.

It feels strangely sacrilegious.

But Himari had insisted, even pouting her lips in a way that always managed to crack Kokichi’s supposedly unbreakable will, and well. Here they were, getting ready to attend a summer festival, just *because*. Kokichi had even managed to bribe Tsumugi with all fifty-three volumes of *Mew Mew Magic Monika* that he had stolen a few years back to have custom made yukata for everyone.

“Ace is right. I mean, we’re just a bunch of normal teens and young adults with mild criminal records, trying to have a good time. Nobody should be able to figure out the former part if we’re not wearing our masks anyways.” Mayumi shrugs. “I mean, seriously… what could go wrong?”

* * *

Despite the setting sun, summer heat lingers in the air like sticky spun sugar, melting into the folds of their clothes and under their skin. Kokichi adjusts his checkered obi in a vain attempt to alleviate some of the trapped heat, waiting for the rest of DICE to file out of Daichi’s run down car. (How all ten of them manage to fit in there all the time, well. Kokichi isn’t sure, to be honest.)

Even from the parking lot, he can make out the soft glow of lanterns that line the bustling streets of the festival. The sound of cicadas and other festival-goers slowly swell in the air as they start making their way closer. Soon, Kokichi finds himself staring at the entrance—fairy lights strung against a wooden *WELCOME* sign, distant shouts from vendors trying to attract customers, the smell of sweets drifting around—and some part of him suddenly understands why Himari was so insistent on spending her birthday here.

A small group of children run past them, giggling while holding bags of goldfish and little firework sparklers. Kokichi blinks against the scene.

(It feels strangely bittersweet, to be faced with a childhood that never was.)

“Rule number two,” Kokichi finds himself saying, quickly turning to everyone else in a grand motion. It seems that the rest of DICE also sense the fragile, elastic atmosphere that surrounds them, as they all turn to him with bright, wide eyes. “Try not to get kicked out, ‘Kay?”

“Of course, Joker— I mean, Kokichi,” Himari quickly amends when Kokichi glares. She bounces up and down on her feet, clearly eager to get started. “Sooo, where should we go?”

Daisuke waves his hands around, practically vibrating in place. “I wanna see if I can win a sick prize at one of the game stations—”

“—I think I’ll be going for the candy apples. I’ve never had one before—”

Mayumi interrupts, “Wait, do you guys think they have any drinks around here—?”

"Okay, calm down everyone!" Kokichi calls, stomping his foot. The rest of DICE instantly quiet down at his voice. "I know we're all very excited to be here, but there's no reason to rush. Why don't we split up for now? In groups of at least two, so nobody gets lost. And then, when it's time for fireworks, we can meet up back here. Sound like a deal?"

Kokichi is met with a chorus of agreement. Already, Megumi, Ryuu, and Daisuke are running off, wildly yelling amongst themselves. Youta ambles off not long after with Mayumi, towards the food stands.

Watching everyone disperse, Kokichi lets out a sigh. His eyes turn to the sky above, which is quickly becoming a darker shade of blue, almost black, as the sun steadily drips away.

Hopefully, nobody would do anything too drastic… although, the last time he left DICE to their own devices, they managed to rig the wavepool to try and get bigger waves, only to break the machine and flood the park, resulting in a lifetime ban.

"Heeey, Kokichi! C'mon, let's get going!"

Startled, Kokichi blinks to find Himari and Reo, watching him with expectant eyes. Against the soft light of the matsuri, the both of them seem to glow, smiles as bright as the hanging lanterns that surround them.

"Hm? C'mon, don't you guys wanna enjoy the festival?" Kokichi smiles back at them, with the one usually reserved for DICE. A bit softer around the edges, lips closed and eyes crinkled. "You should get going before the fireworks start, y'know?"

Himari huffs at that, pouting her lips. "Not without you, Joker! You gotta have some fun too!"

"It's *Kokichi*, not Joker," he responds, almost instinctively. "We're here as just us, not DICE. Remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I wanna get going, so let's just go, alright?" Reo sighs dramatically, his usual polite facade slipping for just a moment to reveal a scowl.

Kokichi sticks up his middle finger. "You're a pest, you know that? Why'd you even stick around?"

At that, Reo tilts his head, auburn bangs falling across darkened eyes. "Hm? Well, because I wanted to spend time with my *beloved* supreme leader, of course! Make sure he has a good time, you know?" he says sweetly, laced with an undertone that implies the exact opposite.

"It's Himari's birthday," Kokichi deadpans, as both a warning and a reminder.

"Aw Joker, do you not trust me?" Reo snickers.

At that, Himari finally lets out a dramatic sigh, grabbing Kokichi by one arm and Reo by the other. "Ugh, you two are insufferable— let's *go*, losers!"

Kokichi stumbles a bit as he's dragged along into the bustling crowd. It feels like plunging into a cold pool; the chatter of dialogue and laughter instantly surround him, bubbles of bright light and colorful haori bursting in front of his eyes.

And Kokichi knows how to swim, has been thrown into the ocean before, forced to tread for his life, survive in a world that stepped on him, never wanted him. He's wrangled control into his own hands and crawled his way to the top, to his ultimate talent, taught himself how to survive and get to shore.

But Kokichi blinks, and the waves fade away, and things are… fine, things are okay. Nobody looks at them strangely, like they did when he was six and desperate for a family, always covered in dirt from playing pretend with the other outcasts of the orphanage. Nobody looks at him with curiosity, like they do at Hope's Peak, where he hides his truths behind a cunning smile and an unnerving mask. Nobody looks at him with the fondness and reverence he doesn't know how to handle, only pretends to know as DICE showers him with a foreign feeling he's come to recognize as 'care.'

Nobody looks at all, really. They're just three nameless faces in a crowd of many, drifting along.

He simply exists, and there's something strangely calming about that reassurance.

"Hey, isn't that your classmate?" comes Himari's voice, alarmingly close to his ear, and Kokichi startles out of his thoughts.

They seem to have made it to the section of festival games. There's a low pool full of goldfish, children swarming around to try and catch one in their little nets. A *shateki* stand nearby is lined with little toy rifles and prizes to shoot down. A group of teens surround a ring toss game, rowdy as they cheer on their friend.

And there, in between the *yo-yo tsuri* stand and the *superball sukui* is—

"Rantaro?"

The man in question turns his head, shooting a lazy grin once he spots them. "Yo," he calls out nonchalantly. As if it's normal to be running a stand at a festival. "Didn't expect to see you here!"

"That's *my* line," Kokichi scowls, walking closer; Rantaro stands casually behind the stand, an assortment of different stuffed animals hung up above him. Himari skips ahead, a clear grin on her face— it's not often the other DICE members get to interact with Kokichi's classmates, after all.

"Eh, my parents are a sponsor for this festival. Apparently they needed more volunteers for some of the stands so... here I am." Rantaro spreads his hands, as if to present his little stand. "It's pretty nice, isn't it?"

"How do you play?" Himari says, leaning in closer. There's an assortment of colorful plastic balls lined up by the front, and behind Rantaro are groupings of soda cans, stacked in a variety of pyramid shapes. Himari seems to be eyeing a giant, stuffed rabbit.

"Try to knock down as many cans as you can with three balls. The more you get, the more prizes you can choose from." Rantaro smiles, holding out a ball for Himari. "Simple, right?"

Kokichi rolls his eyes, handing Rantaro the fee for the game while Himari readies herself. He watches, unable to hide the small smile on his face as Himari sticks out her tongue in concentration, overly dramatic in the way she holds out her hand to aim. Kokichi can't quite remember the last time he and DICE were able to relax like this, and despite himself, he feels himself relax.

It strikes him, suddenly, that this sort of simplicity is what having a family might feel like.

"Anytime, now," Kokichi snickers as she stands there, instead of voicing his revelation. Himari puffs up her cheeks in response, keeping her arm steady.

"You can't rush *precision*, Kokichi!"

Finally, she throws— *nice shot,* Kokichi finds himself thinking, as the ball cleanly hits the center of a large pile of cans, effectively knocking most of them down. Himari lets out a cheer, spinning in place, and Kokichi ends up giving her a high five.

Rantaro smiles kindly as he holds out another ball. "That was a good throw," he compliments, at which Himari blushes.

Before Himari can grab onto it though, another body suddenly pushes through, startling both Kokichi and Himari.

"I'll give it a try," Reo starts, appearing like a ghost. "Hold my fish for me,"

Kokichi blinks, wondering when Reo disappeared in the first place. "Reo? Where have you been since we— wait, what?"

Reo holds up a little plastic baggy of two goldfish. "I've decided their names are Deez and Nutz."

At that, Kokichi splutters. "When did you even have the time to get those? And *where* do you plan on keeping them? We don't have a fish tank back at our base, y'kno—"

Ignoring Kokichi, Reo plops the baggie onto Kokichi's hands, and turns to the stand. Unlike Himari, Reo doesn't waste any time. He grabs a plastic ball, stares at the target for perhaps a second, then winds back his arm and *throws*—

And the ball ricochets off the walls, slamming into the back of Rantaro's head with a clean *'thunk!',* before bouncing off and perfectly hitting a stack of cans, knocking everything off the stand.

For a moment, there's silence between them, as Rantaro blinks in disbelief.

Then, like a dam breaking loose, Himari starts by choking out an "*Oh my god*—", but Kokichi is already laughing. And it's not the low, whinnying laugh he does, like *nishishi*, and it's not the overly boisterous laugh he has when he's trying to make himself seem bigger than he is. It's a *giggle*, bubbling over like an over-shaken soda can, and now that he's started he can't stop.

It's a sort of laugh he hasn't let out in a long, long time.

"I— you— *Rantaro*," Kokichi gasps out between breaths, "That was so good, holy *shit*—"

"Yeah, yeah, very funny," Rantaro grumbles out, rubbing at the back of his head. "You got good aim, kid."

Reo, completely deadpan, puts his index and ring finger to his lips in imitation of a gun. "Bullseye."

Kokichi lets Himari take the last shot, who once again takes her time in aiming the ball. It's a bit off, but she gets a decent amount of cans down, to which Rantaro congratulates her and offers her a wide assortment of possible prizes. Kokichi finds himself sweating a bit, already imagining having to fit the giant fluffy stuffed animal she's chosen in Daichi's tiny car.

"Candy apple?" comes Reo's voice, once again startling Kokichi. "Oh, thanks for holding onto them for me."

It's then when he realizes he's still holding onto Reo's newly-acquired fish, which is… yet another problem he has to worry about.

"I hope you have a plan for how you're going to care for these, Reo," Kokichi says.

"Ahaha, don't worry. Since when have I done anything irresponsible?"

Kokichi squints, and before he can come up with a long, chronological list of Reo's crimes, Reo shoves the candy apple into Kokichi's face and runs away with a cheeky grin, disappearing into the crowd once more.

He stares at the delicacy now in his hands; he can see his own reflection in the sugary coating, bright red and sparkling against the warm lights around them.

For a split second, he swears that the face staring back at him looks unfamiliar. It takes a moment to realize it's because he looks happy. Softer, somehow, in the hardened caramel glaze.

(Some deep, paranoid part of him wonders if it's really okay to just… be *here* like this. And maybe Daichi was right, maybe Kokichi is overthinking this and they'll be fine, but if there's a truth that he's always sure of, it's that good things don't last.

And DICE has always seemed too good to be true; one day, he's sure it'll all fall apart.)

Kokichi is snapped out of his thoughts when he sees movement from the corner of his eye. It takes a second to collect himself, and another to spot Reo and Himari in the distance, now with Megumi and Tsubasa in tow, all running towards him with a frantic look on their faces.

And to have *Megumi* actually running, of all people, is never a good sign.

Well, he thinks sullenly. *That didn't last very long.*

With an already sinking feeling in his stomach, Kokichi quickly runs up to meet them halfway. Before he can even ask, Tsubasa begins stuttering with thinly-veiled panic. "Okay, first of all, I'm really sorry but blame Mayumi 'cause *she's* the one who started selling beer after taking over some oden stand—"

"Mayumi did *what?!*"

"—and well, you know how Mayumi and Youta get when they're drunk a-and, I was working on some homemade fireworks and they went off by *accident,* I swear, so really, it's not my fault!"

Kokichi takes a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Are you telling me you broke rule number two?"

A pause. "...Not me. Mayumi," Tsubasa supplies unhelpfully.

Kokichi sighs. Before he can start up a lecture, he hears the familiar siren and shouts of what must be the police security of the festival.

"...Alright, screw this." Kokichi scowls. "We're getting out of here. Here's rule number three, and you guys better not break it this time— *don't get caught.*"

✦ ✦ ✦

"Aww man, I *really* wanted to see the fireworks before we had to leave!"

Himari, dejected, sits on the curbside of the parking lot with her arms crossed. The other DICE members are either sitting or lying on the ground, chests heaving with exertion or desperately trying to fan themselves in an attempt to alleviate some of the heat.

They've been running around for the past half-hour after all, somehow getting *everyone* involved in a wild goose chase, which only ended after Daichi conveniently 'tripped' over a pool stand and distracted the guards as water spilled everywhere.

"We're sorry, Kokichi," Mayumi sighs, and surprisingly, she seems genuinely apologetic. "I just wanted to have a good time, y'know?"

"Don't apologize to me," Kokichi says. "Apologize to Himari! It was her birthday, and now we won't be able to see the fireworks."

He's about to make an apology of his own—he failed today, as a leader, and as a friend most importantly. He knew something would go wrong because Kokichi has never been allowed to have nice things and maybe, *maybe this is what he gets for trying to make happiness last*—

But then there's a hand on his shoulder. Tight, reassuring, and he turns to find Himari's determined face.

"No."

"...What?" Kokichi answers an off-beat later, unsure what she's referring to.

"*No*," Himari repeats, stomping her foot with an irritated huff. "No apologizing! You know, I don't really… well…." And she takes a shuddering breath, as if struggling to get the words out. "I lied. I don't really care about the fireworks that much. I don't care about summer festivals or candy apples or plushies or anything like that really. I just… I just wanted to have fun with everyone. With *you*. To see you smile. And maybe it ended in this way, but I got what I wanted, in the end. So... no apologizing."

Himari smiles then, face brighter than any firework that could fill the sky. "You're our leader, Kokichi. I'll follow you anywhere, everywhere, no matter what. So please depend on us too!"

"Yeah, what Hearts said! The party is where DICE is, so I don't care whether we get to chill here or back home," Tsubasa chimes in, everyone chattering in agreement.

Oh, Kokichi thinks, as the voices of DICE, his family, surround him. *Isn't that strange.*

Maybe his childhood was never lost in the first place; maybe he's been given the chance to find it again, here. With DICE. And maybe Kokichi doesn't need to worry about them breaking apart either, because DICE has always been a home; and while good things don't last, a home stays for forever.

"Okay." Kokichi says, feeling an erratic impulse bubble underneath his skin; and this time, he doesn't suppress it, and lets it grow, a wild smile on his face. "Okay, *settle down everyone!* I've decided rule number four for tonight."

"Kokichi, it's okay," Himari sighs, a fondness in her voice. "Let's just go home now—"

"Rule number four is, *screw all the damn rules.*" A pause, for dramatic effect. "We're gonna go back in, no matter what it takes."

Because, who was he kidding? DICE has never been about following structure or stability, and they're all out here to have a good time. It doesn't matter if they have their masks tonight, doesn't matter if he's *Kokichi* or *Joker*, because there isn't a Kokichi Ouma that exists without DICE anyways.

He is, and always will be, the ultimate supreme leader of DICE. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I know we don't have our supplies," Kokichi starts, but Tsubasa interrupts by clearing his throat.

"Well, actually…" Sheepishly, he reaches into his backpack, pulling out a familiar mask. Kokichi is stunned into further silence as everyone else starts pulling out their *own* masks, hidden in bags and yukata sleeves. Reo even slips behind his own yukata, and pulls out Kokichi's.

At his expression, Reo lets out a whinnying laugh. "C'mon Joker, you know us. We wouldn't go anywhere without these. And besides, since when have rules ever stopped us from doing what we want? We're *DICE*. We take what we want and do what we want."

"We learned from the best, after all," Himari adds with a cheeky smile.

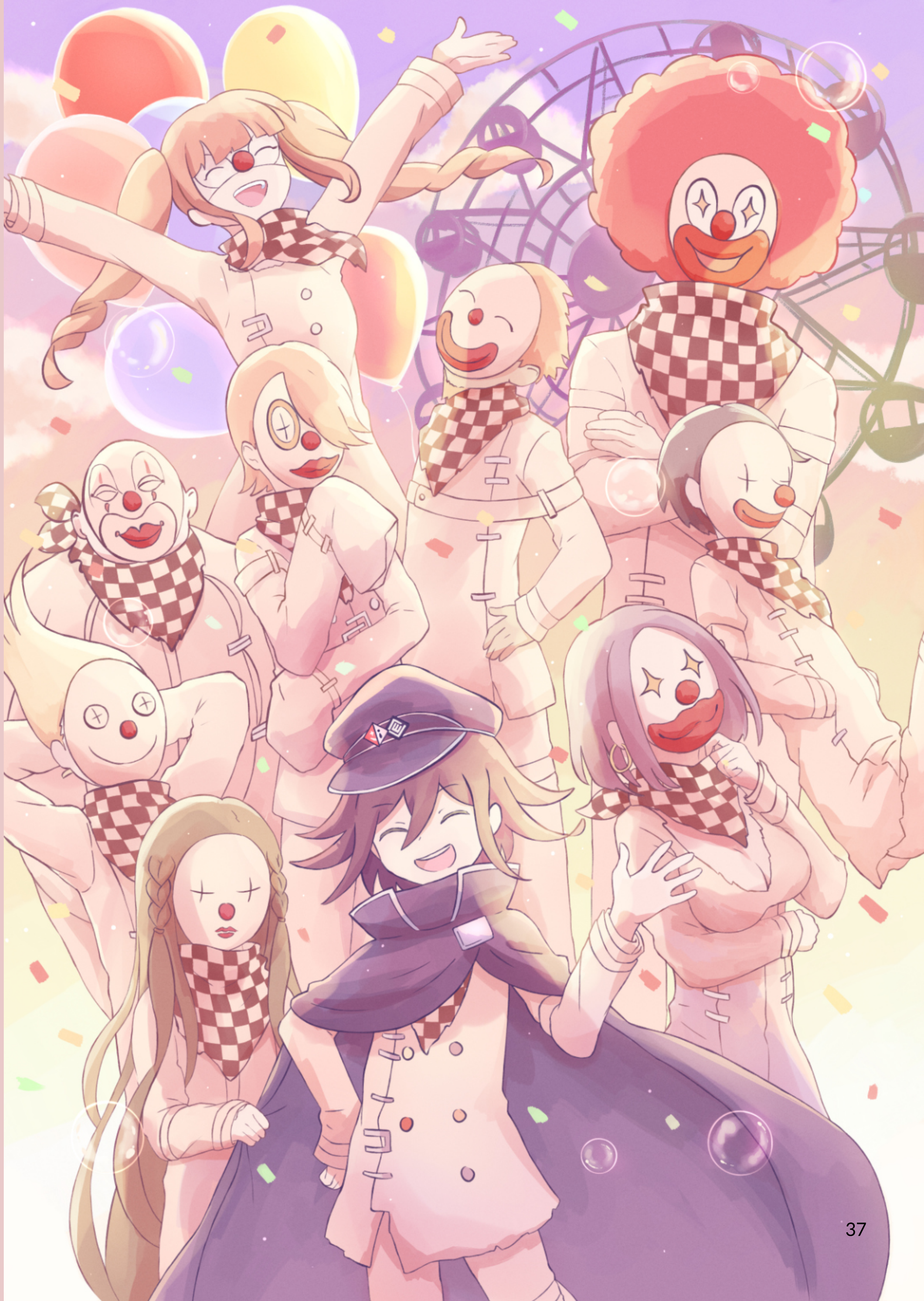
And Kokichi realizes, deeper still: *DICE will truly never get boring.*

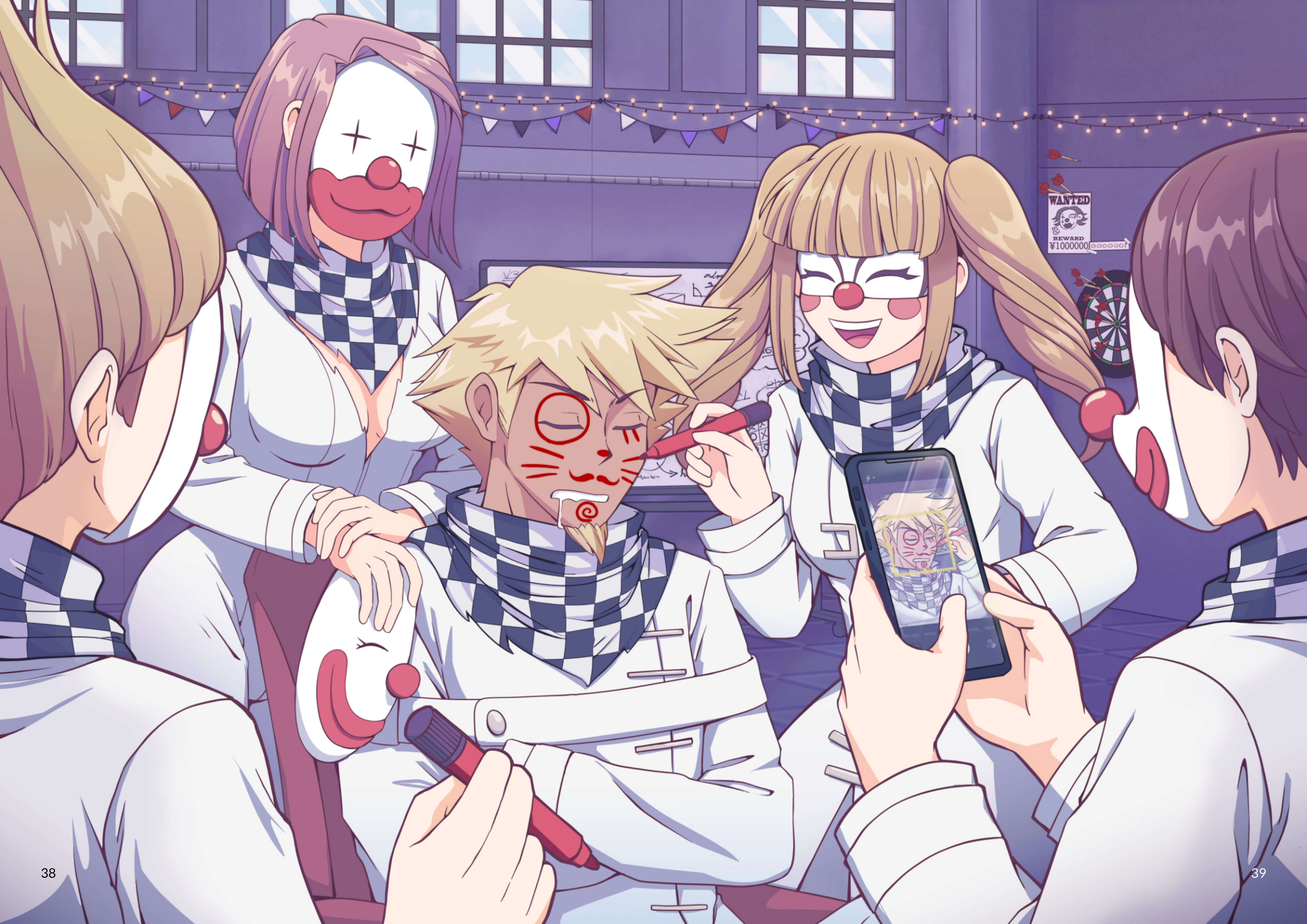
(And the feeling that's been building in his chest the entire day, blooming now like a firework in the sky, might be considered fondness. Appreciation.

Family.)

"Alright." Kokichi slips on his mask, falling into a role he knows how to play, *loves* to play with his loyal nine followers right behind his back. "Now, this lovely bonding moment was fun and all, but I think what we need is a *heist*. Tonight's target? The best viewing spots for the greatest fireworks in all of Japan. After all, what better way to end the night with a bit of fun and chaos, don't you agree?

"Let's show the world what we're really about."

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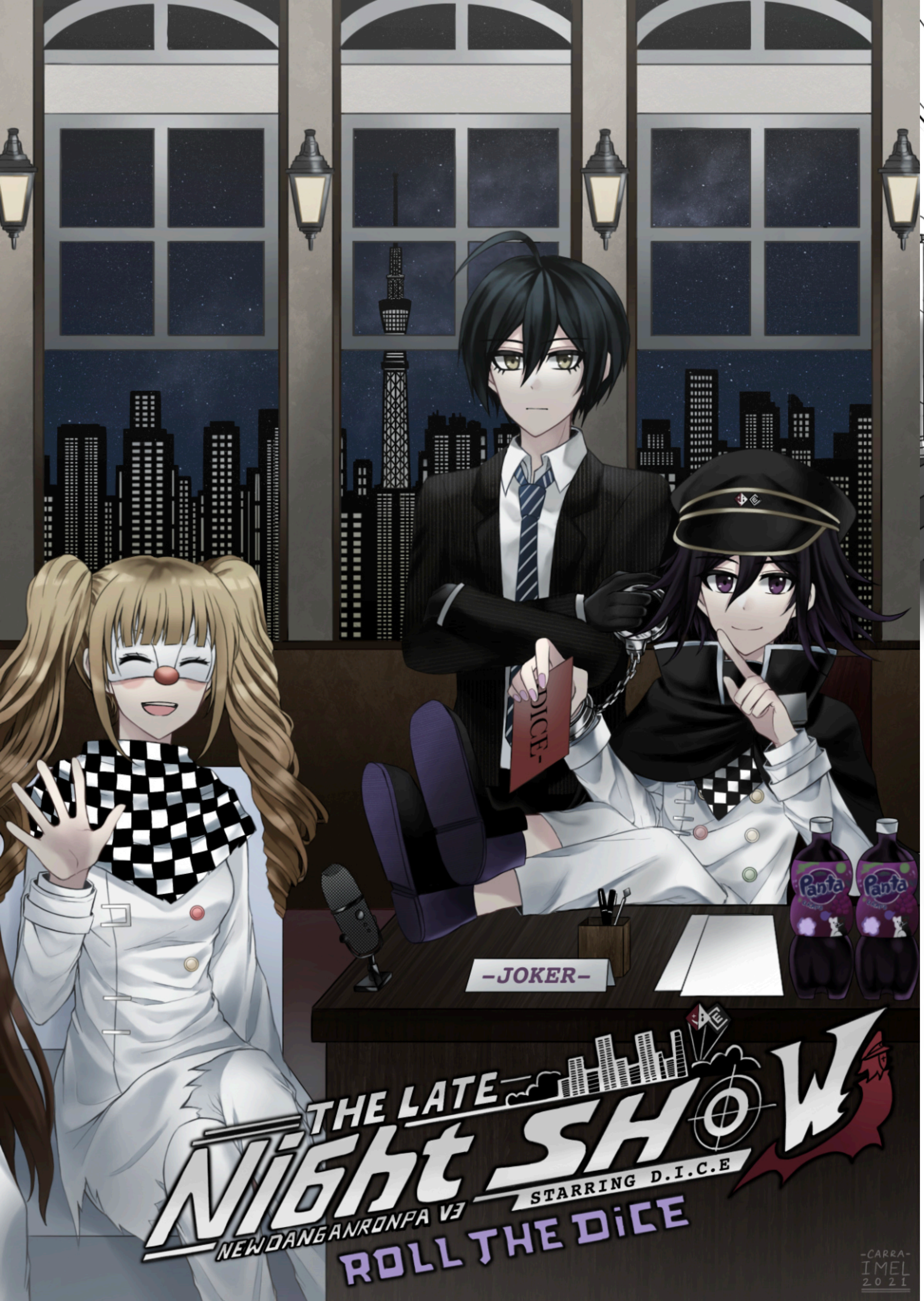
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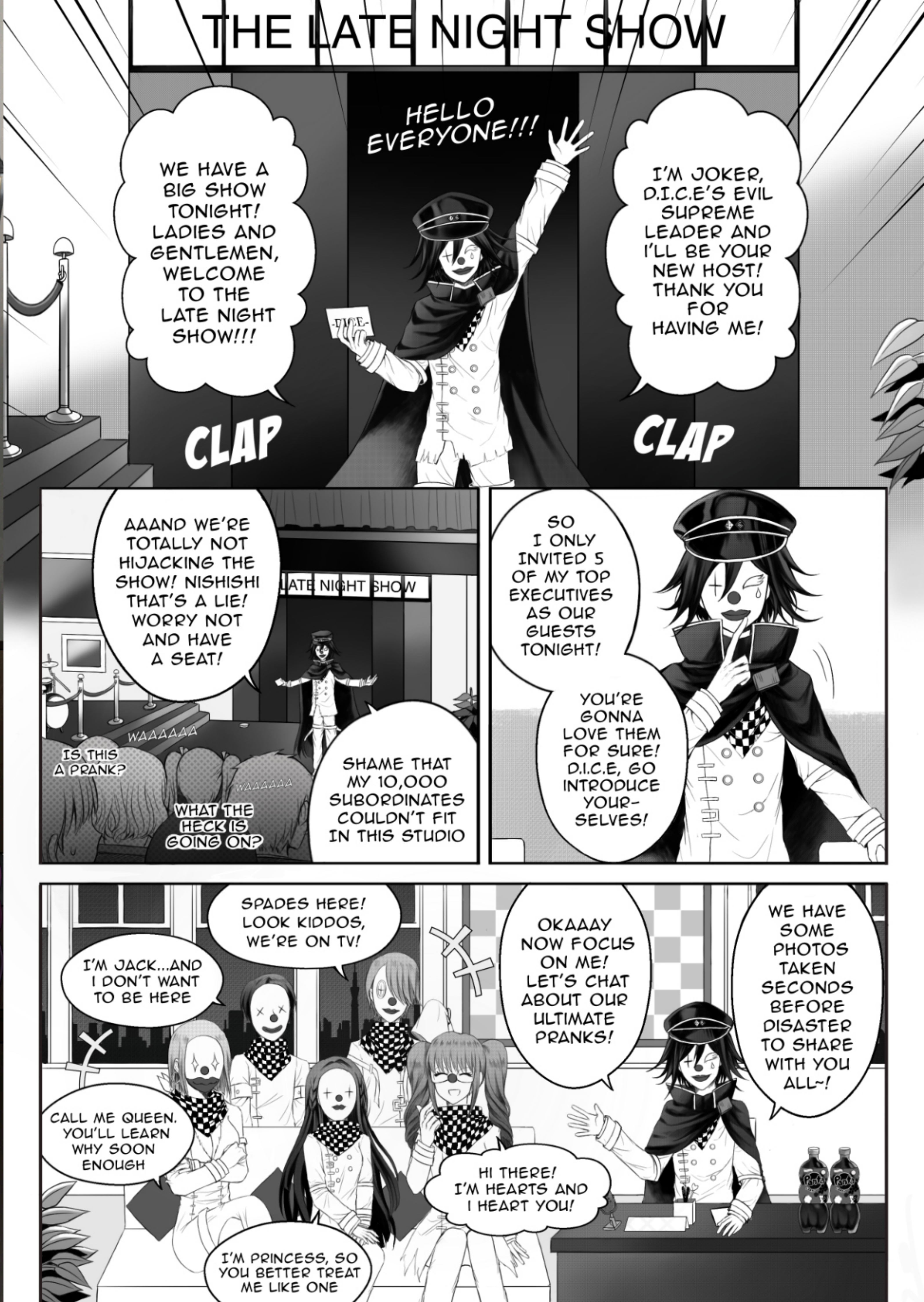
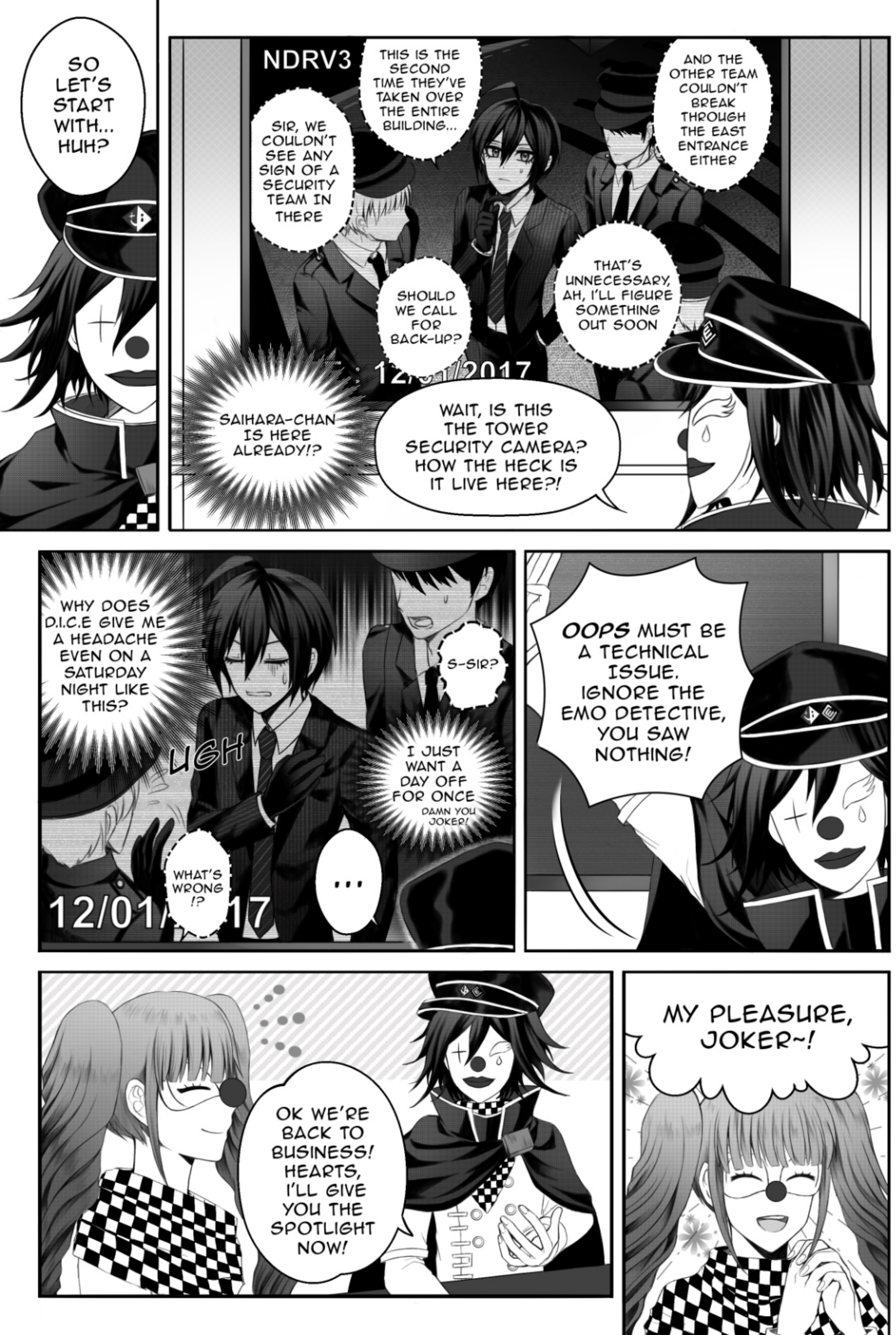
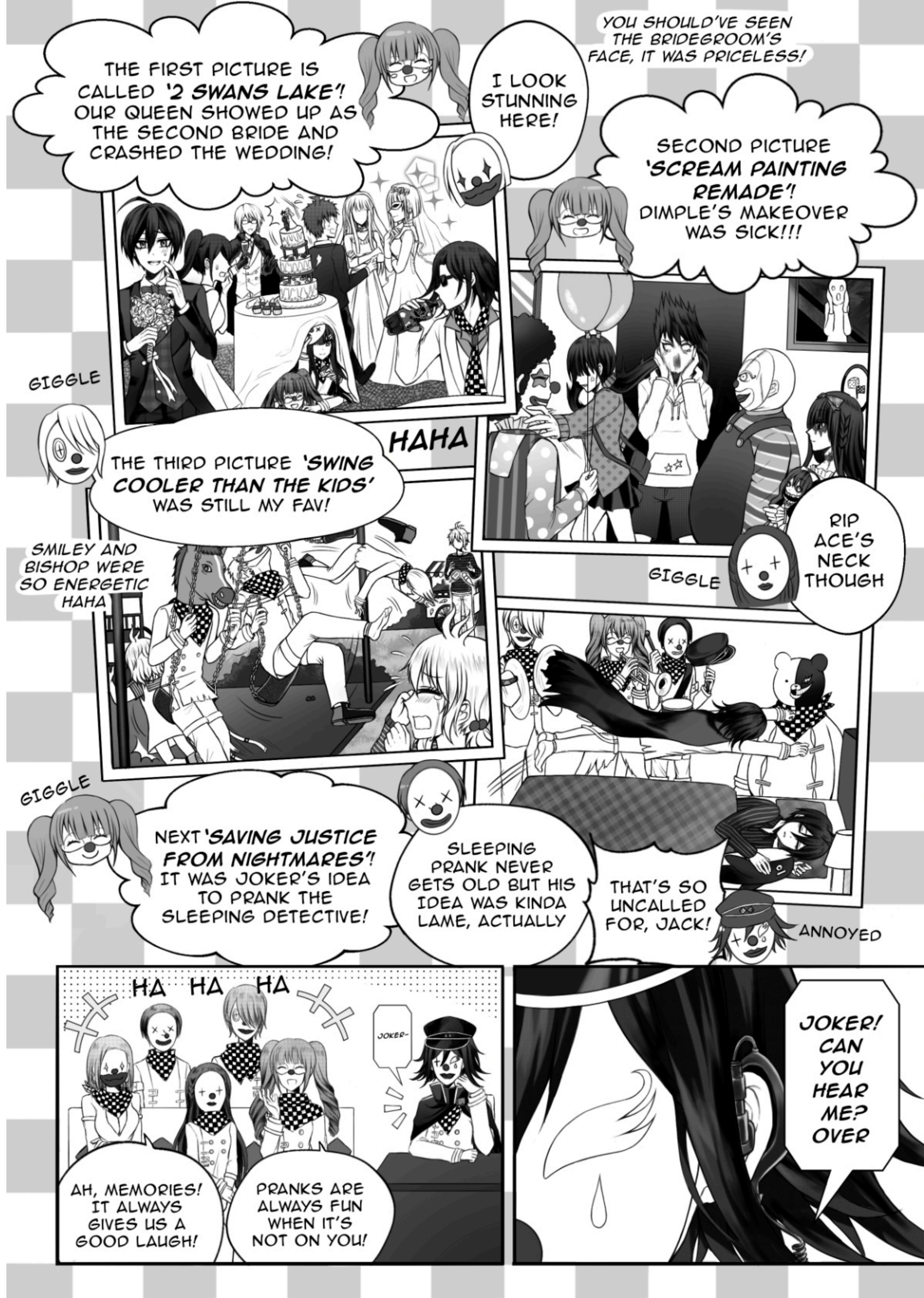
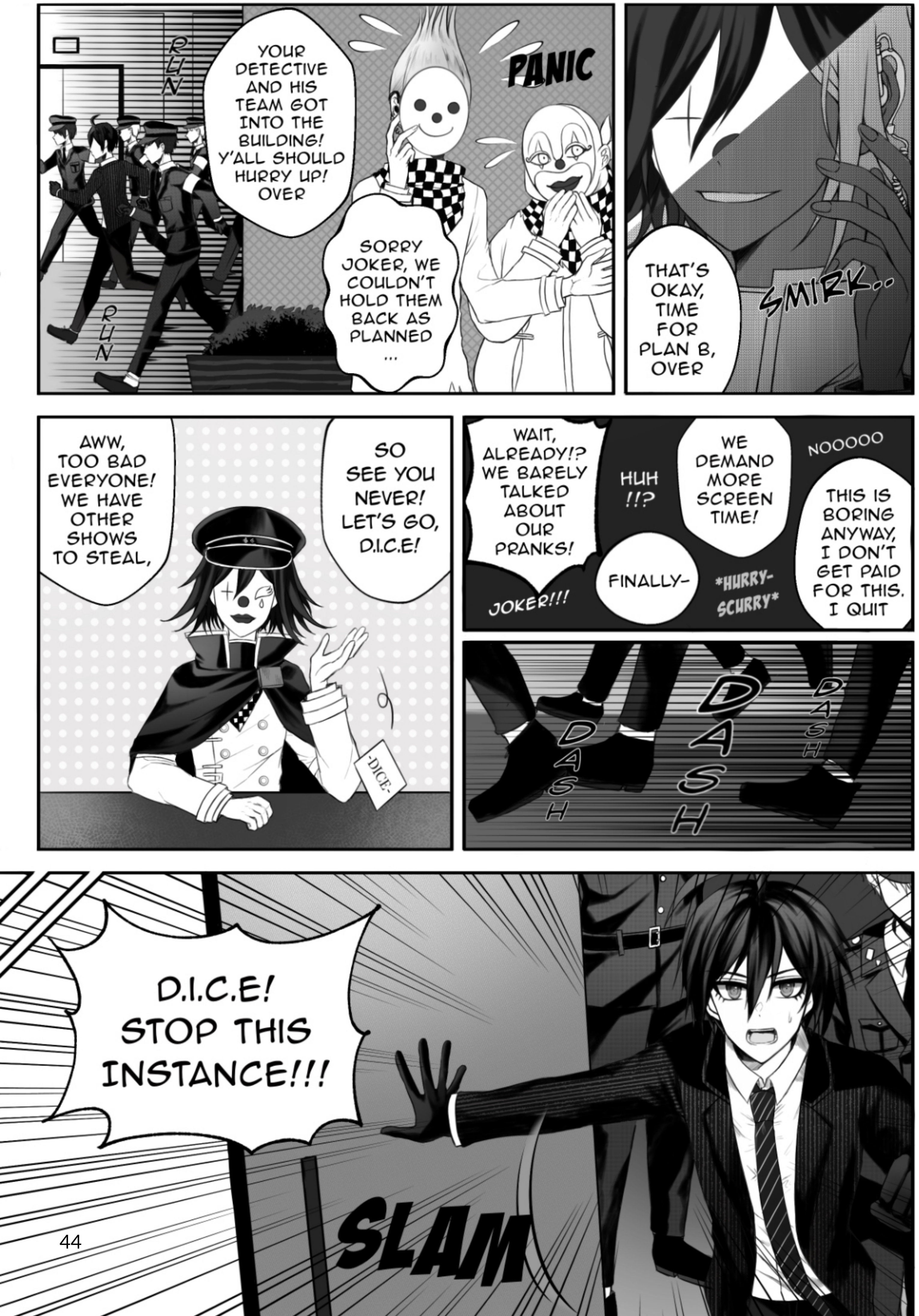
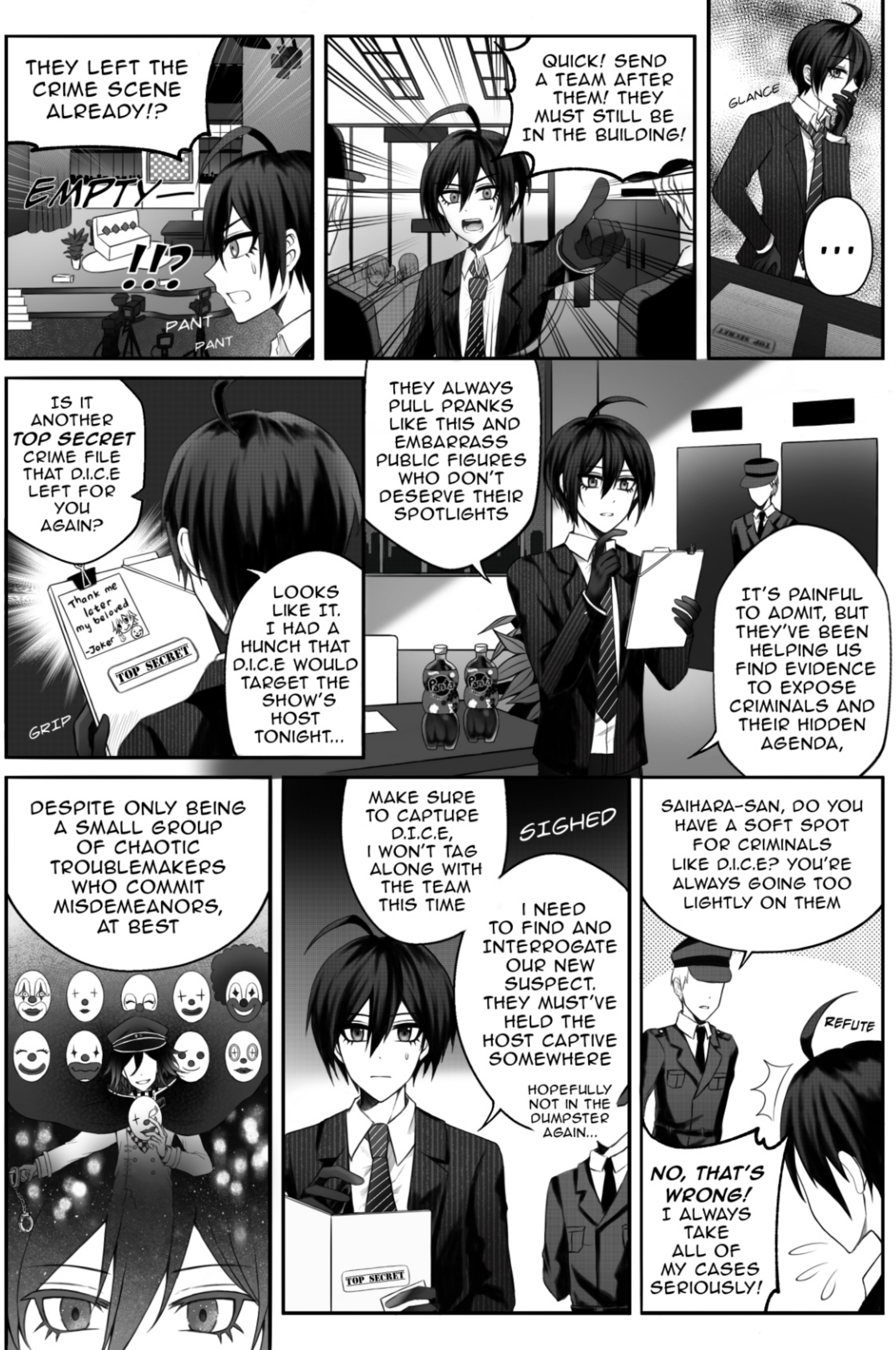
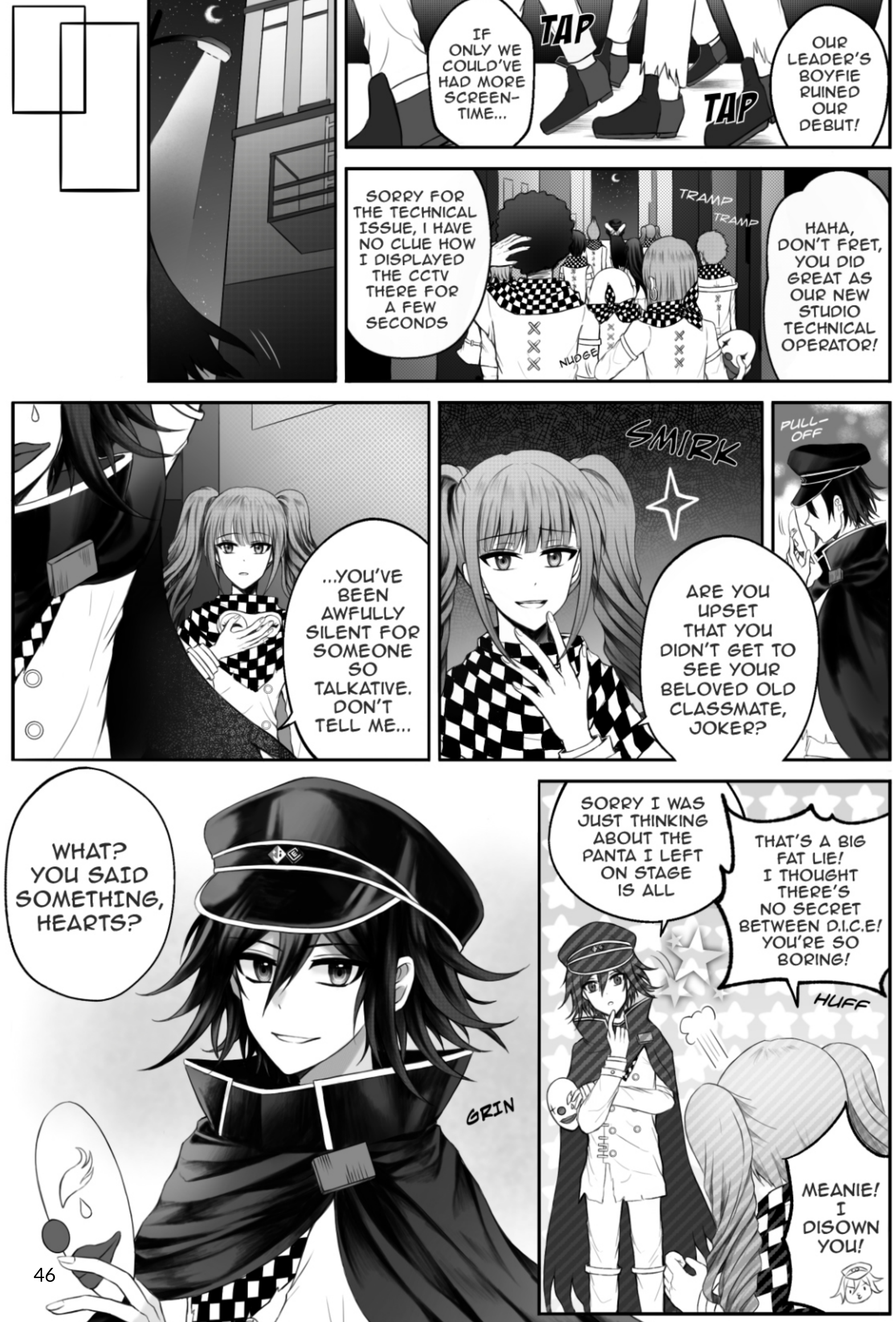

THE LATE NIGHT SHOW
HELLO EVERYONE!!!
WE HAVE A BIG SHOW TONIGHT! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO THE LATE NIGHT SHOW!!!
I'M JOKER, D.I.C.E'S EVIL SUPREME LEADER AND I'LL BE YOUR NEW HOST! THANK YOU FOR HAVING ME!
-DICE-
CLAP
CLAP
AAAND WE'RE TOTALLY NOT HIJACKING THE SHOW! NISHISHI THAT'S A LIE! WORRY NOT AND HAVE A SEAT!
LATE NIGHT SHOW
IS THIS A PRANK?
WAAAAAA
WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON?
WAAAAAA
SHAME THAT MY 10,000 SUBORDINATES COULDN'T FIT IN THIS STUDIO
SO I ONLY INVITED 5 OF MY TOP EXECUTIVES AS OUR GUESTS TONIGHT!
YOU'RE GONNA LOVE THEM FOR SURE! D.I.C.E, GO INTRODUCE YOURSELVES!
I'M JACK...AND I DON'T WANT TO BE HERE
SPADES HERE! LOOK KIDDOS, WE'RE ON TV!
OKAAAY NOW FOCUS ON ME! LET'S CHAT ABOUT OUR ULTIMATE PRANKS!
WE HAVE SOME PHOTOS TAKEN SECONDS BEFORE DISASTER TO SHARE WITH YOU ALL~!
CALL ME QUEEN. YOU'LL LEARN WHY SOON ENOUGH
HI THERE! I'M HEARTS AND I HEART YOU!
I'M PRINCESS, SO YOU BETTER TREAT ME LIKE ONE

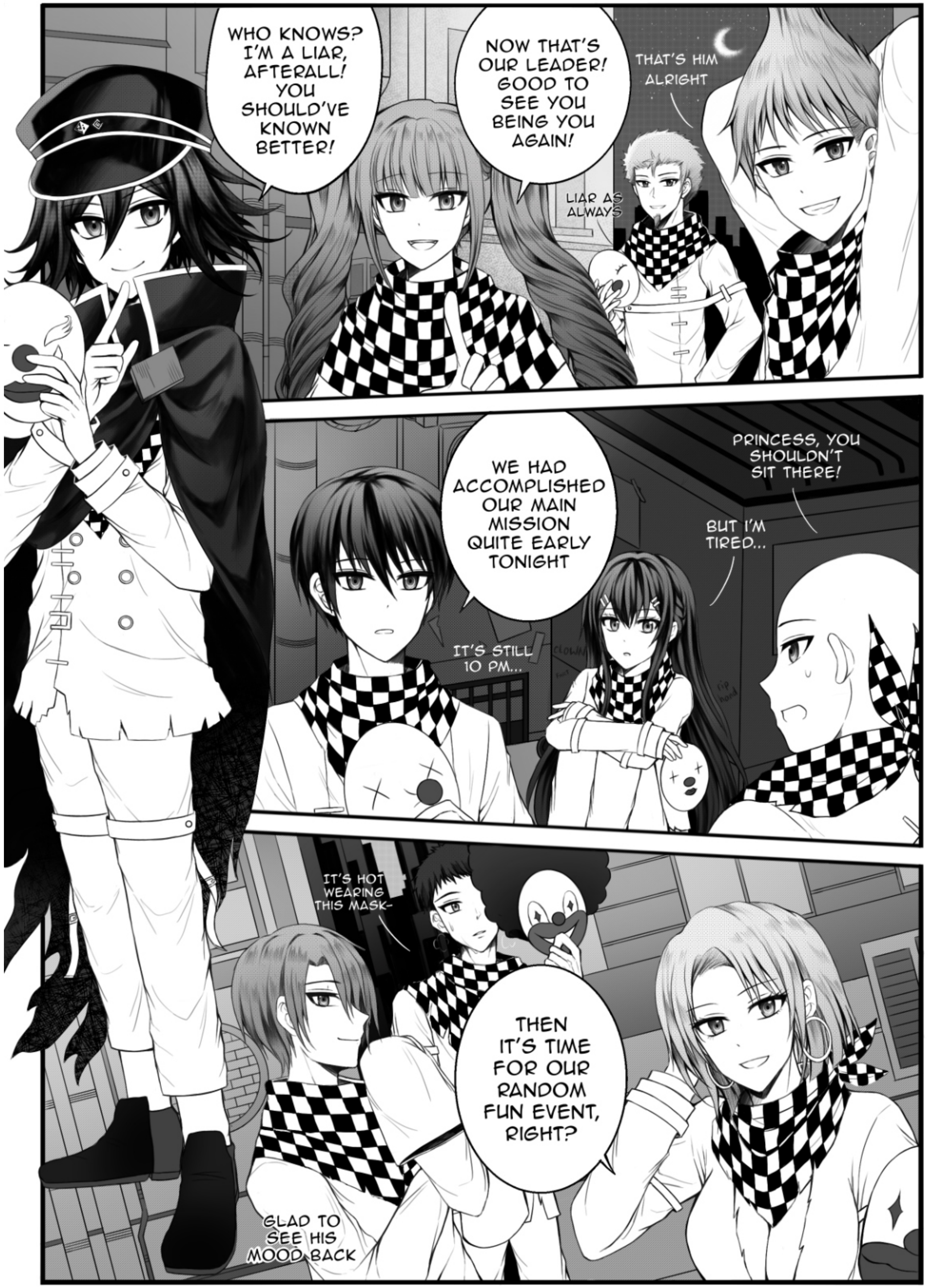

SO LET'S START WITH... HUH?
NDRV3
SIR, WE COULDN'T SEE ANY SIGN OF A SECURITY TEAM IN THERE
THIS IS THE SECOND TIME THEY'VE TAKEN OVER THE ENTIRE BUILDING...
AND THE OTHER TEAM COULDN'T BREAK THROUGH THE EAST ENTRANCE EITHER
SHOULD WE CALL FOR BACK-UP?
THAT'S UNNECESSARY, AH, I'LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT SOON
12/01/2017
SAIHARA-CHAN IS HERE ALREADY!?
WAIT, IS THIS THE TOWER SECURITY CAMERA? HOW THE HECK IS IT LIVE HERE?!
WHY DOES D.I.C.E GIVE ME A HEADACHE EVEN ON A SATURDAY NIGHT LIKE THIS?
S-SIR?
UGH
I JUST WANT A DAY OFF FOR ONCE
DAMN YOU JOKER!
WHAT'S WRONG !?
...
12/01/ 17
OOPS MUST BE A TECHNICAL ISSUE. IGNORE THE EMO DETECTIVE, YOU SAW NOTHING!
OK WE'RE BACK TO BUSINESS! HEARTS, I'LL GIVE YOU THE SPOTLIGHT NOW!
MY PLEASURE, JOKER~!

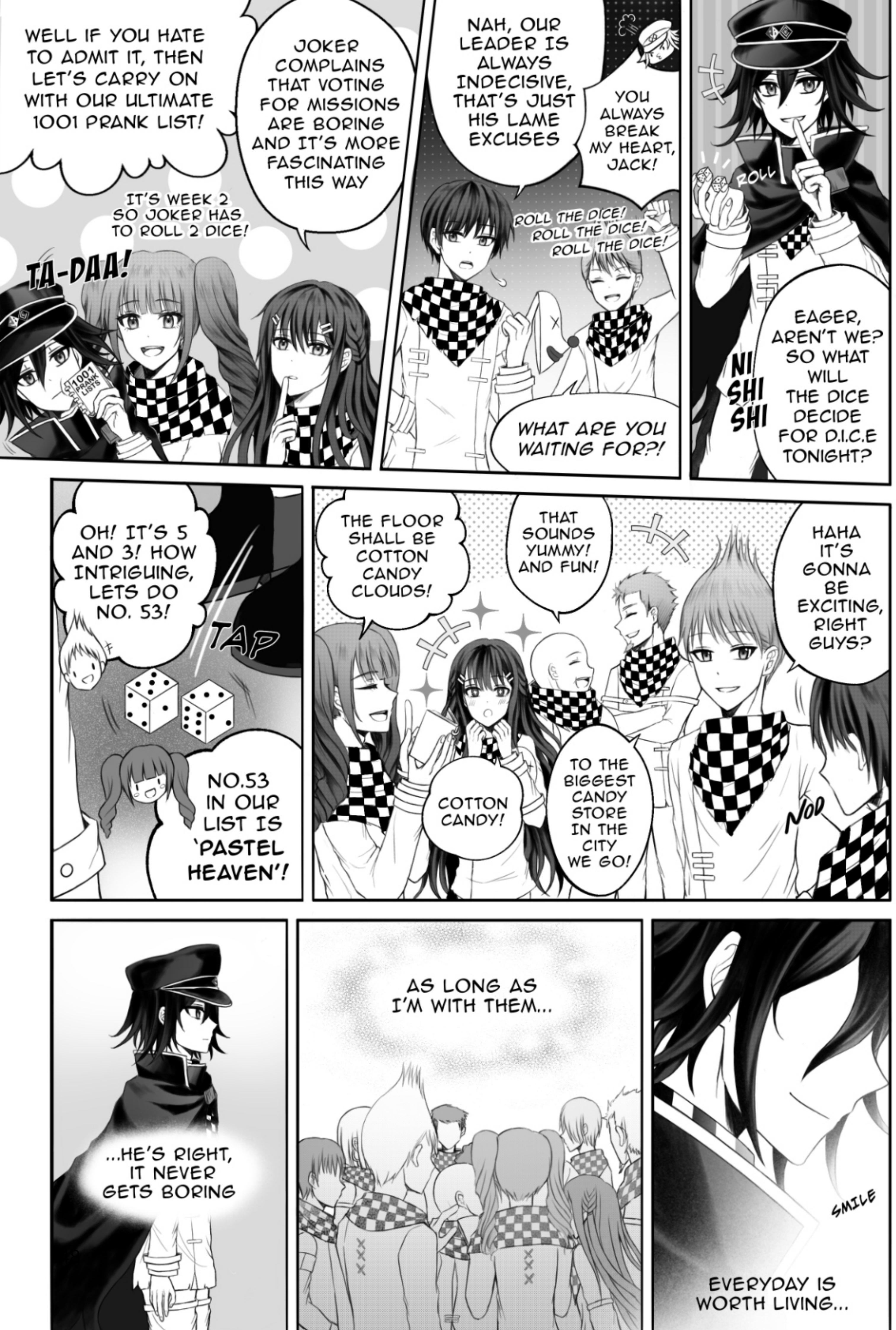

THE FIRST PICTURE IS CALLED '2 SWANS LAKE'! OUR QUEEN SHOWED UP AS THE SECOND BRIDE AND CRASHED THE WEDDING!
I LOOK STUNNING HERE!
YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN THE BRIDEGROOM'S FACE, IT WAS PRICELESS!
SECOND PICTURE 'SCREAM PAINTING REMADE'! DIMPLE'S MAKEOVER WAS SICK!!!
GIGGLE
HAHA
THE THIRD PICTURE 'SWING COOLER THAN THE KIDS' WAS STILL MY FAV!
SMILEY AND BISHOP WERE SO ENERGETIC HAHA
RIP ACE'S NECK THOUGH
GIGGLE
GIGGLE
NEXT 'SAVING JUSTICE FROM NIGHTMARES'! IT WAS JOKER'S IDEA TO PRANK THE SLEEPING DETECTIVE!
SLEEPING PRANK NEVER GETS OLD BUT HIS IDEA WAS KINDA LAME, ACTUALLY
THAT'S SO UNCALLED FOR, JACK!
ANNOYED
HA HA HA
JOKER~
AH, MEMORIES! IT ALWAYS GIVES US A GOOD LAUGH!
PRANKS ARE ALWAYS FUN WHEN IT'S NOT ON YOU!
JOKER! CAN YOU HEAR ME? OVER

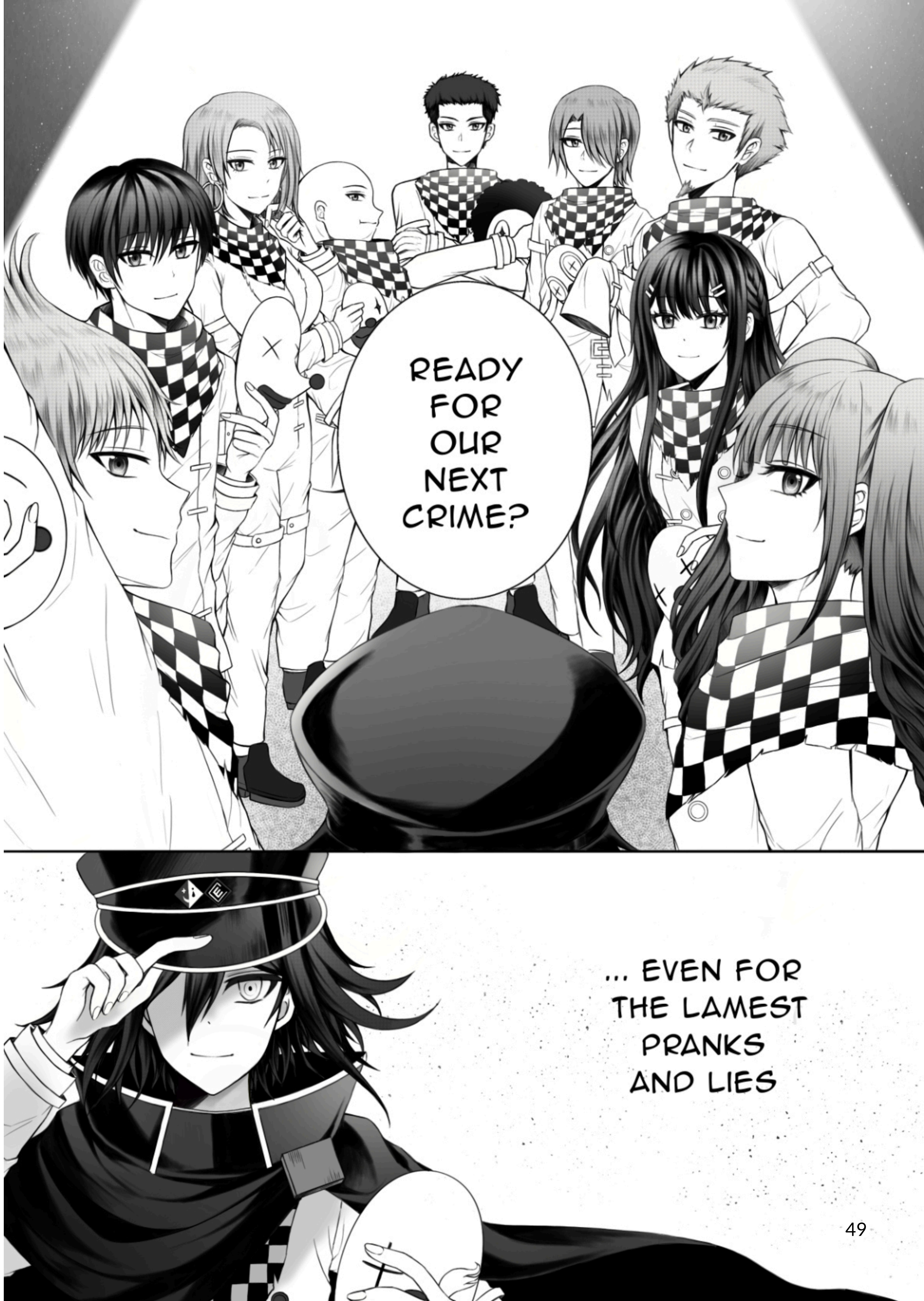

RUN
RUN
YOUR DETECTIVE AND HIS TEAM GOT INTO THE BUILDING! Y'ALL SHOULD HURRY UP! OVER
PANIC
SORRY JOKER, WE COULDN'T HOLD THEM BACK AS PLANNED ...
THAT'S OKAY, TIME FOR PLAN B, OVER
SMIRK..
AWW, TOO BAD EVERYONE! WE HAVE OTHER SHOWS TO STEAL,
SO SEE YOU NEVER! LET'S GO, D.I.C.E!
-DICE-
WAIT, ALREADY!? WE BARELY TALKED ABOUT OUR PRANKS!
HUH !!?
WE DEMAND MORE SCREEN TIME!
NOOOOO
THIS IS BORING ANYWAY, I DON'T GET PAID FOR THIS. I QUIT
JOKER!!!
FINALLY-
HURRY-SCURRY
DASH
DASH
DASH
D.I.C.E! STOP THIS INSTANCE!!!
SLAM

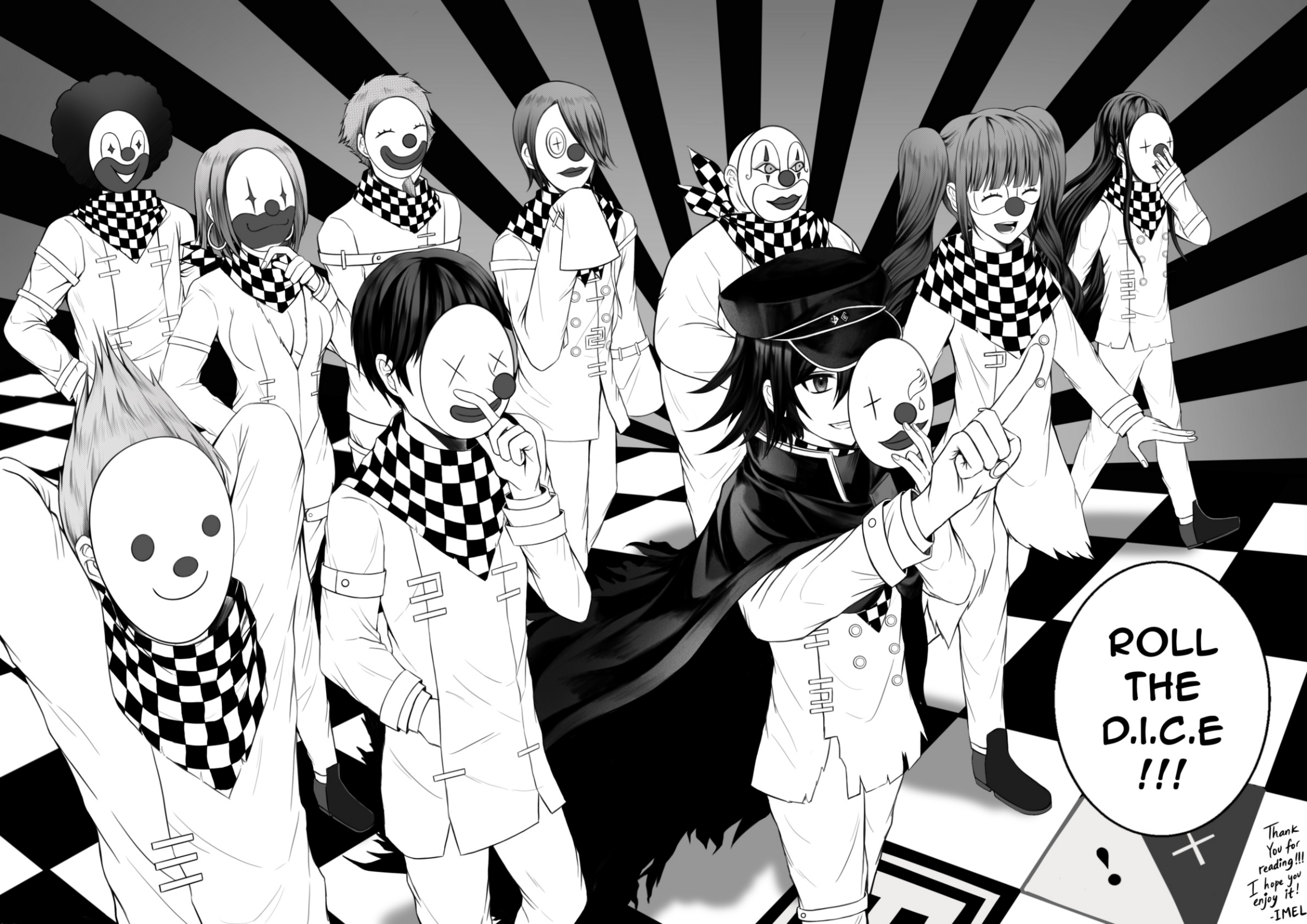

THEY LEFT THE CRIME SCENE ALREADY!?
EMPTY—
!!?
...
PANT
PANT
QUICK! SEND A TEAM AFTER THEM! THEY MUST STILL BE IN THE BUILDING!
GLANCE
...
TOP SECRET
IS IT ANOTHER TOP SECRET CRIME FILE THAT D.I.C.E LEFT FOR YOU AGAIN?
Thank me later my beloved -Joker
TOP SECRET
GRIP
LOOKS LIKE IT. I HAD A HUNCH THAT D.I.C.E WOULD TARGET THE SHOW'S HOST TONIGHT...
THEY ALWAYS PULL PRANKS LIKE THIS AND EMBARRASS PUBLIC FIGURES WHO DON'T DESERVE THEIR SPOTLIGHTS
IT'S PAINFUL TO ADMIT, BUT THEY'VE BEEN HELPING US FIND EVIDENCE TO EXPOSE CRIMINALS AND THEIR HIDDEN AGENDA,
DESPITE ONLY BEING A SMALL GROUP OF CHAOTIC TROUBLEMAKERS WHO COMMIT MISDEMEANORS, AT BEST
MAKE SURE TO CAPTURE D.I.C.E, I WON'T TAG ALONG WITH THE TEAM THIS TIME
SIGHED
I NEED TO FIND AND INTERROGATE OUR NEW SUSPECT. THEY MUST'VE HELD THE HOST CAPTIVE SOMEWHERE
HOPEFULLY NOT IN THE DUMPSTER AGAIN...
TOP SECRET
SAIHARA-SAN, DO YOU HAVE A SOFT SPOT FOR CRIMINALS LIKE D.I.C.E? YOU'RE ALWAYS GOING TOO LIGHTLY ON THEM
REFUTE
NO, THAT'S WRONG! I ALWAYS TAKE ALL OF MY CASES SERIOUSLY!


TAP
IF ONLY WE COULD'VE HAD MORE SCREEN-TIME...
TAP
OUR LEADER'S BOYFIE RUINED OUR DEBUT!
SORRY FOR THE TECHNICAL ISSUE, I HAVE NO CLUE HOW I DISPLAYED THE CCTV THERE FOR A FEW SECONDS
TRAMP
TRAMP
NUDGE
HAHA, DON'T FRET, YOU DID GREAT AS OUR NEW STUDIO TECHNICAL OPERATOR!
...YOU'VE BEEN AWFULLY SILENT FOR SOMEONE SO TALKATIVE. DON'T TELL ME...
SMIRK
ARE YOU UPSET THAT YOU DIDN'T GET TO SEE YOUR BELOVED OLD CLASSMATE, JOKER?
PULL-OFF
WHAT? YOU SAID SOMETHING, HEARTS?
GRIN
SORRY I WAS JUST THINKING ABOUT THE PANTA I LEFT ON STAGE IS ALL
THAT'S A BIG FAT LIE! I THOUGHT THERE'S NO SECRET BETWEEN D.I.C.E! YOU'RE SO BORING!
HUFF
MEANIE! I DISOWN YOU!


WHO KNOWS? I'M A LIAR, AFTERALL! YOU SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER!
NOW THAT'S OUR LEADER! GOOD TO SEE YOU BEING YOU AGAIN!
THAT'S HIM ALRIGHT
LIAR AS ALWAYS
WE HAD ACCOMPLISHED OUR MAIN MISSION QUITE EARLY TONIGHT
IT'S STILL 10 PM...
CLOWN
PRINCESS, YOU SHOULDN'T SIT THERE!
BUT I'M TIRED...
IT'S HOT WEARING THIS MASK-
THEN IT'S TIME FOR OUR RANDOM FUN EVENT, RIGHT?
GLAD TO SEE HIS MOOD BACK


WELL IF YOU HATE TO ADMIT IT, THEN LET'S CARRY ON WITH OUR ULTIMATE 1001 PRANK LIST!
IT'S WEEK 2 SO JOKER HAS TO ROLL 2 DICE!
TA-DAA!
1001 PRANK LISTS
JOKER COMPLAINS THAT VOTING FOR MISSIONS ARE BORING AND IT'S MORE FASCINATING THIS WAY
NAH, OUR LEADER IS ALWAYS INDECISIVE, THAT'S JUST HIS LAME EXCUSES
YOU ALWAYS BREAK MY HEART, JACK!
ROLL THE DICE! ROLL THE DICE! ROLL THE DICE!
WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!
ROLL
NI SHI SHI
EAGER, AREN'T WE? SO WHAT WILL THE DICE DECIDE FOR D.I.C.E TONIGHT?
OH! IT'S 5 AND 3! HOW INTRIGUING, LETS DO NO. 53!
TAP
NO.53 IN OUR LIST IS 'PASTEL HEAVEN'!
THE FLOOR SHALL BE COTTON CANDY CLOUDS!
THAT SOUNDS YUMMY! AND FUN!
COTTON CANDY!
TO THE BIGGEST CANDY STORE IN THE CITY WE GO!
HAHA IT'S GONNA BE EXCITING, RIGHT GUYS?
NOD
...HE'S RIGHT, IT NEVER GETS BORING
AS LONG AS I'M WITH THEM...
SMILE
EVERYDAY IS WORTH LIVING...


READY FOR OUR NEXT CRIME?
... EVEN FOR THE LAMEST PRANKS AND LIES


ROLL THE D.I.C.E !!!

Thank You for reading!!! I hope you enjoy it!
-IMEL

Operation: Hope's Peak Break-In!

Written by Mimca

Outcasts like *them* would never have been allowed to even look at Hope's Peak's grandeur, let alone get in it. To have even one of them be a student there, that was a sacrifice they all had to make, as a team. Unless they decided to break in.

Then again, Daichi Kubo had never been even one-tenth of the leader Kokichi had been for D.I.C.E., so of course, that was a fiasco waiting to happen.

EVEN IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT, the hallways were flooded, with that sort of supernatural light that thinned their shadows inside. Immaculate marble floor and lockers aligned with no sign of scuffle, even Daichi Kubo, who had dropped out before thirteen, could say without a doubt that Hope's Peak Academy was, in fact, a grand school.

Which made him wonder why it was so *easy* to break into.

He would have thought the *"Young Elite of the Nation"*, would have better protection. He remembered all too well why he had dropped out of the system in the first place: the hearsays, the nasty laughs following his every step, the punches in the bathroom stall. For a split second, he thought how easy it would be to slip in one of these Ultimates' rooms and put his hands around their neck. Just a split second, before he regretted it. That was not what D.I.C.E. was here for. At least, not their youngest members–those who still had the endurance to wait for Santa Claus.

Megumi and Reo dragged behind. Even under the masks, Daichi could see the way their heads moved to look at the ceiling, the real grandeur of Hope's Peak slowly sinking in.

"Wooow."

"Jack," Daichi admonished. "Not so loud."

"Calm down," Reo dismissed. "There's no one here. Hey, Princess, you think there's a Pokéstop in this place?"

"Jack."

The two boys challenged each other with heavy silence. Leadership was such a new thing for Daichi. He was no Kokichi, and he did not know how to handle the youngest D.I.C.E. members the way their leader, closer in age, did. Especially the ones as young and… confrontational as Reo. The *brats*.

Megumi came to his rescue, pulling a strand of hair behind her ear. "Should we… find the boys' dormitory? Before someone catches us."

Reo took a step back, admitting defeat.

Daichi turned around, sighing. There was something quite ironic in having a smiling mask; because he felt the few months he had spent as the new self-appointed leader of D.I.C.E.–as in, no one else volunteered for the position–had already molded his actual face in a permanent frown. "Let's find the main hall first. In *silence*," he tackled that last part on, shooting a pointed glance at Reo.

Even without any security around, surely the Ultimate Assassin or the Ultimate Swordswoman would be happy to do the job themselves. But most importantly, Daichi did not want *him* to know they were here. He missed Kokichi, sure, but the only reason he had accepted to break into Hope's Peak Academy was for Reo and Megumi's benefit–as a friend, and a brother. They did not understand yet. All three of them. Kokichi included. The chance he had to even *be* in this school…

Oh, *right*! The main hall.

The map of Hope's Peak was a labyrinth that would have made Daedalus himself cower in shame. Even with their previous investigations, they figured there was no way to access the dormitories directly from the main building. There was something sinisterly purposeful in that design, too, but Daichi did not mention it.

In the hall, they found the board–every school had that one corkboard, at least that remained a constant truth of the universe. And, buried under the latest ad for the All-Girl Music Club *(looking for a Triangle–yes, we're serious!)* and some weird religious propaganda *(pray God to Pass the Practical Exam! Starting fee at ¥2,000)*, the map. Daichi's eyes quickly scanned it before moving on ahead.

Boys' dormitories: buildings A to C. Class 53: building C. Kokichi Oma: here we come!

Megumi came trotting by his side, with Reo sheepishly dragging behind. "Can we, at least… leave a message?"

"No," Daichi said–as he had said the last ten times she asked that same question. "We're not even supposed to be here at all. He mustn't know."

She bowed her head sadly, letting her hair fall around her face. Daichi hated seeing her so defeated, knowing all the effort she made to even speak up. He felt as though he had broken some magic spell.

"I know you've told us already," she continued, her voice now barely a whisper, "but why?"

"B'cause," Reo said from the back with a toneless voice, "he'd want to come home to us."

A different kind of silence settled between the three of them. Awkward. Suffocating. Usually, D.I.C.E. missions were fun–full of laughter, of forgotten dreams, of bad memories spat in the night sky like so many stars. They were not supposed to be done in silence.

"Okay, listen–"

"*Hey*! Who's there?!"

The three of them froze. Two twin lights were creeping towards their feet. Instinctively, Daichi raised his arms to stop the younger two from moving forwards–which they inevitably tried to do. He even felt Reo taking refuge in his large shadow. They knew when it was time to play red light, green light. Usually, security guards quickly gave up. Ten seconds, according to Kokichi.

They were paid for ten seconds of awareness.

Ten seconds.

Ten…

"I know you're here," the voice bragged from afar. "If you're a student, I'll let you know it's forbidden to go out after ten o'clock! And if you're not…" The lights were close to their feet, lingering like the threat of a high tide.

But that's not a security guard, Daichi thought. *Just another student.* "Go on," he threatened in a growl, walking a foot into the light's way. "What if we're not students?"

"*Oooh*," Reo added, with that voice too loud to be contained in that juvenile body, "Ace's using his Papa Wolf voice! Be afraid!" The threat seemed to work, or Daichi's massive silhouette did the trick; for the light retracted under him. The tide was shy tonight.

"Well…" The voice stuttered, in an almost… *mechanical* tone? Dragging each letter separately. "Trespassing is a severe crime!"

"Hmpf. And who's going to arrest us? *You?*"

"I-I will," the student oh-so bravely affirmed, as the lights trembled. "I can't let you roam as you please in our school! Identify yourself and your intentions!"

Daichi walked forwards, another step. The silhouette of the person facing them was clearer. A bit bulkier than your average teenager, the small, constant buzzing in his voice–like an old ventilator, waiting to burn and die–and that light that seemed to come from his very eyes. Yet Daichi could not pretend he was impressed. There was only one student of Class 53's roster that could fit the bill. "Nah, you go first," Daichi said.

"Ah, hm…"

"What," Daichi teased–though *teased* was not quite the word for it. There was no warmth in his voice at all, only a cold disdain, "is it not part of your programming?"

Megumi and Reo might have figured it out too, because they remained cautiously behind him.

"It's K1-B0," Megumi whispered.

"The Ultimate *Can Opener*," Reo added.

"H-hey," K1-B0 (civil name Kiibo Idabashi, not that Daichi cared) bit back, "do you want to add robophobia to your crimes?! I'm not a tasteless can opener!"

Daichi grinned. *The robot is touchy, it seems.* "So, what do you do, exactly? We're still waiting for you to finish that little threat." Of course, D.I.C.E. never harmed or killed anyone, but K1-B0 did not know that. He was not sure if that rule extended to robots, but Daichi was not going to risk it. Fall into his bad habits all over again.

"If you want to blow us up, now's your chance."

"Stop!" K1-B0 blinked helplessly. What a pitiful attempt at humanity, trying to act scared. "I'd *never* do that! You people," he added with a low, whirring sound that might have been muttering, "are worse than Kokichi."

Daichi froze on the spot.

"You… know Kokichi?" Megumi, God–*starting fee at ¥2,000!*–bless her, piped in, at the mention of their leader's name.

K1-B0, perhaps sensing that he had a card to play here, proudly put his hands on his hips. "Of course! I should've known you were related to Kokichi!"

They said nothing still. Daichi could hear the echo of gears grinding in the back on his own head. "Well," K1-B0 went on, "as his fellow student, I–"

"Fellow student?"

And he laughed. Uncontrollably. Mayumi had told him once that his laugh was *awful, like a bear out of his circus, ready to kill*. And he did not know if it was that he had been holding it in for so long–the laughter of D.I.C.E. had run away with Kokichi–, or just the absurdity of this scene, but it actually hurt. Some ghost was trying to pry it out of his throat. Even Megumi took a step back. Even *Reo* took a step back.

K1-B0's simile of a smile fell. "I don't see what's so funny–"

"What's funny," Daichi said, breathing out, regaining his composure, "is that you dare to compare yourself to Kokichi."

"As Ultimates–"

"What's your merit as an Ultimate?"

"…Excuse me?"

"Ace," Megumi whispered.

"You were *built*," Daichi ignored her, eyes riveted on the android, "to be an Ultimate. You don't have any merit to be in this school. You don't know even *half* the effort it takes to become a student here. Let alone *stay* here."

K1-B0 had nothing to say to that.

"You don't know what Kokichi had to sacrifice so he could become the Ultimate Supreme Leader."

"You guys." A hushed silence. "I suppose Kokichi left you guys… to enter Hope's Peak?"

"No." Daichi probably should never have been so forward with a perfect stranger, Ultimate Robot or otherwise, yet he could not let even the *thought* that Kokichi could abandon them, fly. Not in front of the teens. "*We* left Kokichi."

Kokichi would never leave D.I.C.E., Daichi knew. He had been the first one to become part of what would become D.I.C.E.. He remembered it like it was yesterday. The boy had popped into his life when he was fixing an old van in his parents' backyard–only half his own age, and already with a wisdom that, looking back on it, should not have belonged to a kid's voice.

"Are you planning to leave for real, someday?"

He pretended to be a neighbor. Daichi thought he would have seen him before if that were the case, already full of paradoxes–wearing the impeccable black uniform of the Imperial Capital Elementary, and yet hair full of grease, making the end of his hair curl like demon horns–, but Kokichi was just a kid then. He pretended he had been watching him work on this stupid thing *for months now. It was, actually, the truth.*

"I get it," Kokichi added. "It's scary, huh? You think life's crap.*" And he was not just parroting the bad words he had heard from his parents, like most children did; he said it with a weight that Daichi understood instantly.* Yeah, life's crap. *"But you don't know if it's any better anywhere else, right?"*

But, back then, Daichi was a teenager. And, like many teenagers, he was stupidly self-centered. "That thing's old," he justified himself. "It takes time. Besides, who told you I'm running away?"

"Uuuh?" Kokichi stretched his vowels with fake surprise. "Who said running away?*"*

"…Kid."

"Kokichi."

"…Kokichi. If you're just here to drive me crazy, piss off." Daichi felt his hand tightening around his wrench. "I've got work to do."

Kokichi pulled his body away from the fence with a telling half-smile. "You mind if I come back tomorrow?"

He did not remember what he had answered–because he was convinced that, no matter what it was, Kokichi would have come back regardless. And Daichi was not a self-deprecating man, but he was a realist. He had been a violent teen. A violent man. *At his worst, he would come back home with bloody knuckles, a broken nose, a twisted bone that long forgot the shape of a nose. Back then, he* totally *could have punched a nine-year-old. Just saying, Kokichi would have had reasons to ditch him.*

He never did.

"Hey, Kub," Kokichi had asked once, "when you're finished with that van, will you take me with you?"

"…Where do you want to go?"

"I don't really care."

And now, their old van–still not running–had become their headquarters, full of trash, full of plans for future pranks, only limited by their collective imagination. In the broken sink where he used to wash his hands in, someone–Reo? Daisuke? He could not be sure–had snuck in a pet lizard.

Between themselves, they never talked about the reason that brought them to become part of D.I.C.E. in the first place. Kokichi was their only common point. Daichi could only hazard guesses, the way Youta always shoved his pockets full of food, the way Himari always sat with her hands over her stomach, flinching at the sound of any cry. And Kokichi, though he was always the most secretive of them all, was betrayed by the mere nature of the organization's members: they were the outcasts.

But they were happy.

Until Hope's Peak came in the picture.

Daichi still did not know how Hope's Peak recruitment found out about their location–though such a feat was not any surprise, coming from the most powerful high school in all of Japan. But the letter had appeared nonetheless, one fateful morning, slipped under the door with the school's crest on the front. And once they saw it, they all knew who it was addressed to. All but one.

Kokichi unfolded the letter by the corners, arms stretched out, as if it had been covered in poison.

Dear Kokichi Oma,

On behalf of Hope's Peak Academy's Scouting Team, I am pleased to announce you have been invited to join the next promotion of Hope's Peak Academy!

The accomplishments you have achieved as the head figure of the organization known as D.I.C.E. reflect all the values we are looking for: ambition, strong conviction, curious intellect, organizational skills, and empathy. If you were to accept this invitation, you would be entering Hope's Peak Academy as the Ultimate Supreme Leader.

Becoming a student at Hope’s Peak Academy is a unique opportunity. For over 200 years, our school has helped its students honing their exceptional skills through personalized courses accommodating their talents, as well as building a network between individuals. Our purpose is to bring hope to–

Daichi did not hear the rest of Hope’s Peak promises. Kokichi started to laugh. Not the happy laugh, either; a rising, full-throated laugh, full of bile, that made a shiver crawl up their collective back. His fingers were trembling around the letter.

“Can you believe it, guys? Those hypocrites want to scout me!” There was nothing but hatred *in those words. “Trying to get me to join their stupid elite!* Ah!*”*

Kokichi was just about to tear it down. The image quickly flashed into Daichi’s mind. He was going to make little confettis out of it, or crumple it into a neat little ball and score a three point in the bin; then, like the rest of his problems, he would never talk about it ever again.

“I don’t get it,” K1-B0 said.

“Of *course* you don’t get it,” Daichi growled. “You’ll never do. Kokichi would’ve rather *died* than abandon us.”

But he could not *refuse to join, Daichi’s mind decided. He did not need to look at the other D.I.C.E. members to see that they shared the same thought. There was no doubt in their mind that Kokichi was the Ultimate Supreme Leader, with or without Hope’s Peak judgment on the matter. He was smart. He was fun. He was charismatic. He was kind. He was both a friend, a child, a brother, even a rival to them all. And…*

They moved through Mayumi, putting her hand over his shoulder, stopping him. Her mouth moved, fast. And Kokichi remained unnaturally silent. His smile fell, folded in an expression foreign to his features. His eyes scanned over D.I.C.E., one by one, looking for support. None emerged.

Present Daichi breathed in, trying to summon Mayumi’s words. “Kokichi can make something out of his life. He can be *someone*. Someone worth *something*. It’s not his duty to waste that opportunity, taking care of a bunch of nobodies.” And though it hurt, he was convinced they were right in that decision.

Yet Daichi could never forget, even as he spoke, the look of utter *betrayal* on the Ultimate Supreme Leader’s face.

“Now, I highly suggest you let us meet our leader. Or act on that little threat of yours.”

“My… apologies,” K1-B0 trailed off. Though his earlier confidence was gone, the robot’s feet remained steadily rooted in the ground. “However… I can’t let you pass.”

“*Huh?!*” Reo, who had managed to stay quiet so far, jumped in indignation.

“*Please*,” Megumi begged, with all the strength her voice was capable of.

“I can’t let you roam as you please,” K1-B0 accused pointedly. “I…” Daichi made another step. They were so close now, their faces could have touched. “If you’re causing trouble…” The buzzing in his voice stuttered for a second–probably the closest thing to swallowing saliva his engine allowed him to do. “Kokichi would be in trouble too?”

“Why do you care? You said it yourself.”

“It–It’s true that Kokichi and I don’t always see eye to eye. But… He’s still my friend.” Daichi extended an arm mechanically, stopping Reo from breaking the robot apart–or trying to, at least. “And… I wouldn’t want him to leave Hope’s Peak. Just like you.”

K1-B0 held up Daichi’s gaze, for what seemed like an eternity or two. Himself felt Reo and Megumi’s eyes shooting holes in his back. He felt it, and yet he was conflicted between two loyalties. And, as he had seen Kokichi do many times before, as the new unofficial leader of D.I.C.E., he knew he would have to make a choice, a decision that would be challenged, no matter what side he took.

He stepped back a bit, away from the robot’s face. “How is he?”

“…Huh?”

“Kokichi,” Daichi sighed, already regretting it. “How is he?”

“Oh! He’s… fine?” Under his mask, Daichi raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure what else to say…”

“Does he have any friends? Outside of *you*,” he added, probably more harshly than he intended it to be, for K1-B0 shrugged dismissively, his ego hurt.

“Of course, outside of *me*… Well, in our class, there is Miu, Gonta… and Kaede and Shuichi? And he hangs out a lot with those two girls from the other class, Chihiro and Celeste…” The list of names meant absolutely nothing to Daichi, but he listened with some sort of… *Possessiveness*? He should have been happy that Kokichi had found other people to call friends. He should have known that would happen. Why save himself for people who betrayed his trust? And yet…

He could not show that feeling. All for the sake of Reo and Megumi. All for the sake of D.I.C.E.. “Kid.”

“Kiibo.”

“…Kiibo. Will you take care of Kokichi?”

Daichi’s brain muted out the kids’ protest in his back, as Kiibo just tilted his head. “Of course?”

“Thank you,” Daichi said in earnest. As long as Kokichi had a place he belonged, that was the most important thing. For now, *Ace* could handle things at home. And if Kokichi, for some reason, wanted to come back to D.I.C.E., they would wait for him. Three years, more, if they had to.

He just had one last clarification to make.

“Because if we hear something happens to him…” Instead of walking forward, he bent over Kiibo, making him feel his towering height. “We’ll *burn* this place to the *ground*.”

Kokichi would not be around to stop Daichi. And even Hope’s Peak grandeur could not stop D.I.C.E.’s love then.

EXAMS NEVER!
52 RESOURCES
53 FICTION
52
DEEZ NUTS
No food or drinks
Respect furniture
Groama Lisa
-Errasin
EVIL
he looks
MATH
HOW TO STUDY FOR YOUR EXAMS IN 2.5 HOURS
By Tsumugi Shirogane - January 12 2017
Now listen to me young one, for I am talking directly
into your ear now. I need you to do me a little favour
You will do this for me. I just need you to go to gamestop,
and I need you to ask the idiot working the counter
they just so happen to have Junko Enoshima on the
SDR2. If you come back empty handed you'll
be in big trouble. I will make sure you never see the
light of the outside world.
The FitnessGram™ Pacer Test is a multistag
aerobic capacity test that progressively gets
difficult as it continues. The 20 meter pacer t
will begin in 30 seconds. Line up at the start. T
running speed starts slowly, but gets faster ea
minute after you hear this signal. [beep] A single
should be completed each time you hear this sou
[ding] Remember to run in a straight line, and run
as long as possible. Th

crystalrina

DICE FASHION

BISHO
-DICE-
-DICE-
HEARTS

A Beginner’s Guide to Successfully Poaching Talent

Written by Bean

The facts are undeniable; there is a stranger in her home.

Mayumi goes through all five stages of grief in the span of a second. She has no one else to blame but her past self for testing the will of the universe or whatever cosmic forces were apparent when she made that stupid wish to be put out of her misery. Now, her present self gets to deal with a possible nutcase with questionable intentions in her home.

I’M GETTING TOO OLD FOR THIS, Mayumi thinks, with the kind of belated realization that settles in with bone-deep fatigue. A cursory glance at the radio on her bedside cabinet reveals *2:00AM* blinking across the LED panel in glaring red; it’s much too early to be debating whether to drag her burnt-out flesh-bag of a body from underneath the covers and investigate the fierce rattling on her balcony, or pretend everything is fine and hibernate until the world descends into its next Ice Age.

The appeal of the latter option vastly outstrips the first.

Unfortunately, as the world would have it, the notion of choice is all but wishful thinking. Ignoring the infernal racket outside was never on the table to begin with, lest her landlord find another excuse to wring the last few yen from her already-meagre paycheck.

Mayumi presses an arm across her eyes and exhales through her nose, the sound slow and resigned in the way a balloon is deflated by time.

Running down a mental list of causes for the disturbance at ass o’clock narrows down two possibilities that are ruled out just as quickly as they’d come: the first being the broken air conditioner, which she’d never turned on since last summer due to the exorbitant electricity bill; the second being a case of the city crows picking at her potted cherry tomatoes, which was just as unlikely given that the plant had yet to bear fruit.

‘Bear fruit’, as if the leaves along the stalk weren’t already browning.

With a stifled groan, Mayumi swings her feet off the bed and trudges her way across the wooden floor. The sooner she dealt with the problem, the sooner she could salvage what precious hours of sleep she had left before the start of another day’s grind for survival.

In just a couple of steps (courtesy of her ridiculously small flat), Mayumi arrives at her curtained destination. She pushes aside the worn drapery with a sweep of her arm and fiddles with the lock on the door handle, when something catches her eye.

At first, Mayumi isn’t sure what she sees. Blinking in a sad attempt to adjust to the dim lighting, she can make out a blurry silhouette through the protective film she’d plastered onto the glass panes. In spite of the frosted patterning that obscures any of the finer details, there is no denying that the figure perched on the railing is something humanoid-shaped— emphasis on *humanoid*, given the existence of two large mounds sticking out of its back.

Two large mounds that beat in the air frantically, like wings.

Holy shit.

Cold sweat gathers in her palms as her hand remains frozen in place.

Maybe this is all a fever dream, Mayumi thinks. A prelude to her death by overwork in the form of a nonsensical hallucination, in which her fatigue had finally caught up to her and confirmed that her days on earth were numbered.

Some part of her— the part that is too tired to deal with a stranger on her balcony— reasons that it isn’t too late to let the curtains fall back and for her to crawl back to bed. Whatever was out there didn’t seem all that interested in forcing its way into her tiny apartment complex, so why should she care?

And yet, Mayumi finds herself compelled, perhaps by the sliver of curiosity that had somehow managed to survive being forced through the wringer twenty-five years in the making, to slide open the balcony door. With a bit of strain, she tugs at the clunky glass barrier, and—

Mayumi gapes. Whatever she’d been expecting, the sight of two large wings— in all their black, feathered glory— affixed to the back of a person leaves her stupefied. The winged stranger, on the other hand, seems to take no notice of her in their attempts to free the hem of their jacket (likely from the cluster of rusty nails along the railing)— until, perhaps sensing the way Mayumi was boring holes into their back, turns around, meets her eyes, and freezes in place.

A tense moment of silence falls between the two. It’s impossible to tell what the stranger’s expression is like underneath the clown mask pulled over their face, but Mayumi can only imagine how shocked they must feel to be… seen. Nothing about their attire of patchwork white and checkered scarf screams ‘inconspicuous’, but the mask had to count for something, right?

She doesn’t get much longer to collect her thoughts as the winged stranger successfully frees themselves and disappears in a flurry of wings.

* * *

As bewildering the previous night had been, the rest of the day falls into place like clockwork. Mayumi hits the snooze button at 5:30AM, goes back to sleep, repeats the process a couple more times until the clock strikes 5:45AM and she really has to get her ass out of the bed. Blearily stumbles into the kitchen to grab a piece of toast and jam, scarfs it down with instant coffee, then spends roughly twenty minutes to make herself appear like a presentable member of working society. Runs after the local bus, transfers onto the subway. Clocks in for work, somehow manages to stay sane for the next eight hours, until she gets hit by a last-minute crunch that destroys her non-existent evening plans.

By the time Mayumi turns off her computer and steps out of the office, it is already half past ten.

No matter how many years she’s ticked off her life calendar, the rinse-and-repeat cycle of corporate drudgery never seemed to get any easier. It wasn’t just about the kind of task she was assigned, but a buildup of several things— all of them being a flagrant violation of working rights but soldered off as ‘company culture’. The only thing she gained from her years of experience was the wisdom to store cup noodles in the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet for the frequent unpaid overtime.

Now that every fibre of her being isn’t pressed for survival, the strain of the day makes itself known in the form of hunger pangs and utter exhaustion. Mayumi adjusts the strap of her bag and lets her feet numbly trace their path towards the convenience store across the street. This too, while unfortunate, is a familiar routine since living on her own in the city; while cooking her own meals is always preferable to the expense of eating store-bought food, Mayumi knows better (after being hospitalized for acid reflux) than to pretend she has any energy left in her reserves to do more than bring food into her mouth.

Habit guides Mayumi to the aisle for packaged meals, her eyes on the lookout for the red ‘*50% off*’ sticker. As expected, most of the popular picks have been sold out, but there are still some choice selections left, like the chicken nanban dinner or the makunouchi bento.

Mayumi hums quietly in contemplation. She’s partial to deep-fried chicken, but her stomach has been having a harder time digesting anything deep-fried as of late.

That means that her final choice boils down to the makunouchi bento for its assortment of vegetable side dishes this month. Mayumi leans down to grab the bento, fingers barely grazing the top of the plastic container when a voice, sounding rather disappointed, rings in her head:

Oh, but the chicken nanban tastes better....

...What the heck.

The sound was crystal clear, as if a radio transmission was broadcasted directly into her mind. Almost as if— as if it was a telepathic message.

Mayumi immediately raises a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose.

Oh, no no no. She refuses to believe that such a thing could be real. Mayumi is hardly superstitious, but she doesn't plan on tempting the devil— in this case, tumbling down the slippery slope of associating every strange occurrence since her encounter with the winged stranger as something *supernatural*.

Taking a deep breath, Mayumi gives a quick scan of her surroundings and confirms that aside from herself, there are only two other people in the convenience store: namely, the cashier fiddling with his phone behind the counter, and a little kid with long, brown hair and pleated braids. They're both too far to have been able to whisper in her ear, even though Mayumi knows the sound hadn't reached her ears from the outside.

All the hairs on her arms and neck stand on end.

She wasn't imagining things. There was definitely a clear voice in her head. The voice was too soft and sweet to fit the tone of her internal monologue, so who else— what else could it be?

Mayumi rubs against her temples, feeling the onset of a migraine.

First, it was the winged stranger on her balcony at godfuck hours. Now, she was starting to hear little voices in her head.

God, maybe the stress really was getting to her. Mayumi is only 27, but she wouldn't be the youngest to die from a case of overwork. She's starting to think she should take up her co-worker's offer on those New Age meditation classes.

* * *

Things are... odd, following the convenience store incident. Mayumi can't brush aside the feeling that she's being watched; every so often, she thinks she catches something in the corner of her eye, but it's gone the moment she turns to look.

Mayumi doesn't have to wonder for long, as her suspicions are confirmed in a couple of days when she receives an anonymous letter in her mailbox.

We're watching you, the letter says, words pieced together in a collage of newspaper and magazine clippings.

It's hard to tell whether there is a real threat behind the notice. Living alone, especially as a woman, comes with its dangers in the city— but the fact that someone took their time to DIY a warning note in the era of smartphones and online scams strikes a chord of humor in her. Perhaps this is why she elects not to do anything about the situation.

Realistically speaking, of course, the local authorities never took such concerns seriously until it was too late— and well, Mayumi also has nothing to her name aside from a sizable student debt and monthly bills to pay. If it's a ransom this individual is looking for, she figures they will lose their interest over time. Still, Mayumi hadn't gotten this far without a sense of self-preservation; she tucks the letter and envelope into her handbag for safekeeping, and rifles through the rest of her mail.

Don't need a new phone, can't order delivery, don't need night school anymore, oh, another trendy cafe is opening around the corner.

As usual, most of the mail is junk, with the exception of the last envelope. Mayumi clicks her tongue. It's her landlord; she'd notice the handwriting anywhere, and it's the last thing she wants to see after a long day.

True to her gut feeling, the correspondence from her landlord turns out to be the worst piece of news she's gotten in a while.

Fuck, the parasite wants to raise the monthly rent starting the next quarter. By— by 10,000 yen?? That's highway robbery! Mayumi's hands tremble as she skims over the contents of the rent notice. *This has to be illegal,* she fumes, not that legality ever stopped landlords from being scummy parasites. She'll have to look for another place, though securing a cheap one-room without mold, along with a functional bathroom and kitchen is nigh impossible. One of these days, Mayumi is going to buy a bucketload of cockroaches and dump it into her landlord's unit— see how he likes having vermin eat away at every ounce of his income.

Indignant fury aside, it's times like these that Mayumi feels her attachment to life hangs by a very thin thread. Whoever is observing her should quickly put her out of her misery, she muses with a wry smile.

* * *

Life works in funny ways. It's not that Mayumi believes in any particular higher power, but sometimes the coincidences align just so that she suspects someone *is* listening— just not in the ways that matter.

Such is the case on Friday evening. Finally home after an exceptionally brutal overtime, Mayumi manages to jam the key correctly into the keyhole in record time and stumbles through the front door. Squinting in the dark, she feels her way for the light switch on the wall, pressing down when her fingers brush against the plastic nub.

The hallway remains as dark as ever.

"What...?" Mayumi mutters under her breath, repeatedly fiddling with the switch. She'd replaced the lightbulbs quite recently, so it couldn't be an issue of the filaments burning out.

It's always one thing or another, Mayumi grouses internally. Just as she's about to turn on the flashlight on her phone, she is startled into stopping by a voice that calls out from across the hall:

"Oh, I shut down the generator for this unit. You won't be getting any light for a while."

What in the world...?

Feeling a niggling sense of déjà vu, Mayumi peers in the general direction of the voice. The curtains are partially drawn, allowing the light of the moon to filter through the window— still dim, but bright enough so that Mayumi can see the silhouette of a person sitting on her living room couch.

The facts are undeniable; there is a stranger in her home.

Mayumi goes through all five stages of grief in the span of a second. She has no one else to blame but her past self for testing the will of the universe or whatever cosmic forces were apparent when she made that stupid wish to be put out of her misery. Now, her present self gets to deal with a possible nutcase with questionable intentions in her home.

The only upside to this entire ordeal is that her emotional response is delayed by a beat (more like three), and the utter exhaustion of the past few weeks nullifies any of the fear she should technically be feeling.

Taking her silence as a sign of apprehension, the intruder beckons at Mayumi with a hand. "You can come closer, you know— I won't bite!"

Her feet stay resolutely in place. "What do you want," she calls out instead.

The figure leans back on the couch, crossing their arms behind their head. "You certainly don't beat around the bush," they say, clearly amused. "Not even going to ask me who I am?"

When Mayumi remains silent, the intruder blows a raspberry at her. "*Boooo*, you're no fun," they complain with a petulant whine. Bringing their arms back down, the intruder continues with an exaggerated drawl: "Shucks, I'll do you a favour and introduce myself, since only one of us knows how to maintain a proper conversation."

"You can do me a favour and leave," Mayumi mutters under her breath.

The intruder pays no heed to her grievances. Instead, they finally rise from their seated position; even though there is some distance between them, Mayumi can see that the stranger is… short. Combined with the rather juvenile tone of their voice, she's quite convinced that the intruder is just a manic high school kid with too much time on their hands.

"My name is Joker," the intruder starts, "and I'm the Supreme Leader of DICE— the world's most nefarious, underground criminal organization with over ten thousand members!" They sweep their arms before them in a grandiose fashion, ruffling the cape that wraps over their shoulders.

Oh god, Mayumi thinks with mounting horror, *this one's definitely a teenager with a serious case of second-grade-itis.*

She doesn't know what to respond to any of the words that fall from Joker's mouth, but her tiny intruder seems to believe Mayumi was too awestruck to respond. Leaning forward, the caped outsider chatters animatedly, "Pretty impressive, right? Not every high schooler can boast such an illustrious career and reputation, I'll have you know." They puff out their chest with pride.

Mayumi has half a mind to ask if the kid's parents knew what they've been up to, but something tells her the topic would open a whole other can of worms. Quite frankly, she's not interested in playing therapist with a teenager who can lock-pick their way into her home.

Joker presses on with a wave of their hand. "Anywhosies, now I get to tell you why I'm really here." Crossing their arms, they continue, "You see, our existence is supposed to be a top-notch military-grade secret, but since you saw one of our members, we had to take some measures for damage control."

Oh, Mayumi registers a bit dumbly. The events of the past few weeks flash briefly in her mind like a cinematic reel. *So that was all...*

Joker nods sagely. "That's right! Those strange happenings were all us! We've been observing you to make sure you weren't going to snitch on Smiley and his little flight mishap."

"...So you're here to silence me," Mayumi deadpans.

Her caped intruder draws back sharply as if offended. "How could you say that?! I'm too cute to commit first-degree murder," Joker exclaims, sounding on the verge of tears. When Mayumi doesn't react to their fake crying, they revert back to a bored drawl. "All right, ya got me. I can't claim I've got the cleanest hands, but that's a discussion for another day— what's important here is, me and the other founding DICE members have decided that we want to poach you for our organization."

What, Mayumi thinks.

"What," she says.

"It's tough running the world's greatest criminal organization with over ten thousand members, you know?" Joker replies. Wagging a finger in the air, the young teen continues, "You've seen Smiley— it's hard to keep a lil' low-key with the wings and everything. I gotta worry about the state military and other corporate bozos trying to capture my members and run tests on them!"

"...Right."

"But I'm a good leader, so I make sure to take care of the safety and well-being of my team. Which means, while I'm busy working my magic, I soooorta kinda need someone who can run the team account and take care of that administrative pizazz."

This conversation, Mayumi concludes, is completely out of her scope. Unfortunately, there's nothing else she can do but humor the kid, considering she still doesn't know the full extent of what her intruder is capable of.

"So what's the pay," she asks.

"The pay?"

"You weren't thinking of hiring someone without a salary, were you?"

"No, but—"

"Then let's hear the details of your job offer," she says firmly. "I'm willing to join if it's lucrative."

This time, it's Mayumi who crosses her arms across her chest, and Joker who stares at her in silence.

"That sure took me by a surprise!" Joker chirps after a beat. Their tone shifts to something more solemn as they add, "This isn't your standard 'respectable' job you can put on a resume, so I wasn't even sure if you were open to jumping ship—"

Normally, they say.

Mayumi can't help the laugh that bursts from her chest. Leaning against the wall of the hallway, she interjects, "I work anywhere between 10 to 12 hour shifts at my office job, of which I am severely underpaid. Then there's the part-time gigs I take to make sure I can afford my groceries. Every year I have to reapply to renew my contract because I'm a temporary worker who can be laid off at a moment's notice. There's nothing stopping me from 'jumping ship' if I'm being offered what I need for a stable living."

"Point taken," Joker replies. "To answer your question, the rewards after a heist are split equally amongst the team. It's a pretty handsome paycheck, since we target offshore tax havens— much more than anything a corporate slave is used to receiving. I can even forward you details of the last payout, but given the nature of our work, I can't reveal anything more specific— you know, with the danger of leaving paper trails and all," they conclude with a shrug.

"...Fine, then." Mayumi says. "Since I'm also risking an entire career change, I want proof that your team can deliver. Something concrete— I'm all yours, after that."

"A guarantee, huh? Fair enough," Joker says. "You can expect to hear from one of us again in two weeks, pronto."

With that, they slide open the balcony door and leap onto the railing, black wings spreading out from underneath their cape. Giving her a one-handed salute, Joker says, "Later, Mizuho-chan!" and takes to the skies.

Mayumi's eyes follow the young teen until she can no longer see any trace of their wings. She's still convinced that the entire encounter was a fever dream, though she can't help feeling a little whimsical.

The feeling of whimsy dies when she remembers that the generator needs to be turned back on.

* * *

Roughly two weeks later, Mayumi gets an email from her landlord.

Mizuho-san, I'm afraid I've made a grave miscalculation in your bills. As an apology, I will be waiving your rent for the next twelve months.

A message pops on the screen.

[Satisfied?]

Mayumi stares at her phone. She's flooded by a myriad of thoughts and emotions, like the disbelief that this ragtag group of teenage criminals had really forced her landlord to fold on his exorbitant rent increase. The predominant feeling, however, is one of elation, as well as an inexplicable thrill that runs in her veins. Her fingers tap out a heart reaction in response to Joker's text.

Guess I'd better put in my two weeks.

—

When Mayumi walks through the front doors of DICE, she is greeted by the sight of its members in a clamor.

Hidaka and Hasumi seem to be furiously engaged in some debate, most likely over the appropriate tactics to recruit their newest member, while Kaneko and Katsura are bickering over the last gingham cookie on the cookie platter. Skillfully dodging a pair of slippers that are haphazardly thrown in her direction, Mayumi makes her way towards Ouma and slides the manila envelope she'd been carrying on his desk.

"Oh?" Ouma says, raising a brow.

"Shirogane will be starting next week." Hidaka and Hasumi fall silent at her statement, eyes trailing after her as she leans over to swipe the gingham cookie from the ceramic platter. Kaneko lets out an indignant cry that gets muffled as Mayumi shoves the entire cookie in her mouth. Katsura shoots her a disgruntled expression. Mayumi elects to ignore it.

"Th....that's record time! How'd you manage to recruit him?" Hasumi asks. The blonde looks at Mayumi with a bit of suspicion, though he knows better by now not to say the first thing that pops up in his head.

"It was a simple matter of meeting his needs," Mayumi replies.

"Which are...?"

She smiles.

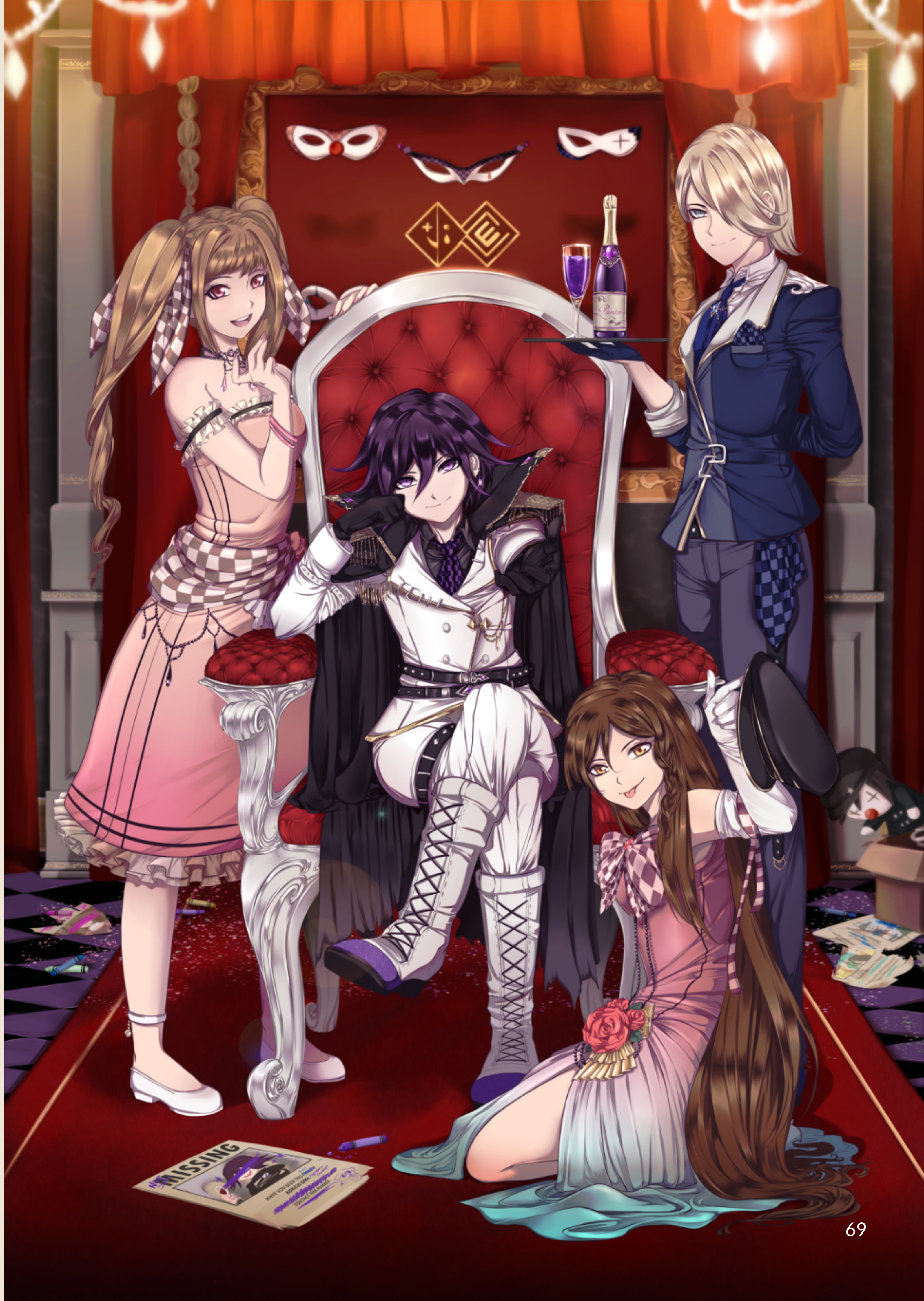
"A competitive salary and benefits package, with paid time off."

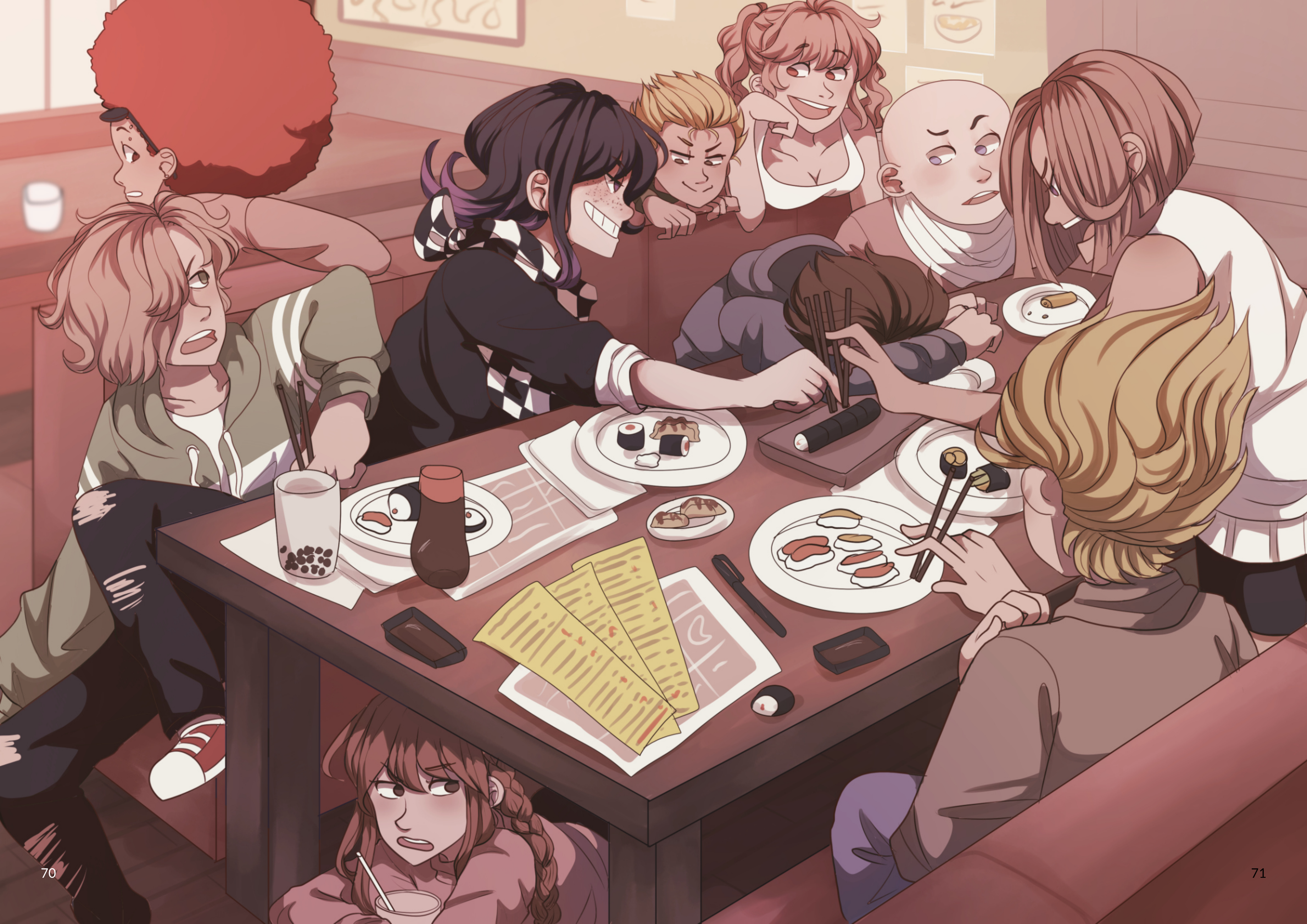
"That's... surprisingly normal," Hidaka says.

Mayumi snorts. "Why don't you try applying for a job in this economy, then, Hidaka." She doesn't wait for his response, knowing he's too busy spluttering in indignation. Rolling her shoulders to work out the knots in her muscles, Mayumi heads for the doors again. "Since I've finished my mission, I'm going to check out for the rest of the day."

"Thanks for the hard work, Mayumi-chan!" Ouma pipes up. He picks up the manila envelope and waves in her direction; the others chime in shortly after. Mayumi lifts a hand in response as she walks out through the doors.

It has been seven months since Mayumi joined DICE. Seven months in, and her new life is the farthest thing from a regular 9 to 5. Nothing is quite standard anymore, and there's no denying the moments of stress and close shaves they've had with danger— but with all things considered, Mayumi is happy to say that she wouldn't change anything about her job with her crew of winged misfits.





WELCOME TO THE HAUNTED HOUSE
Don't
be
DOWN
SPO
WELCOM

A Bin of Lost (and Important) Things that Desperately Need Sorting

Written by Kohi-Anubis

In the cold streets of Tokyo, Megumi finds herself lost. Yet, after bumping into a group of delinquents, she begins to start finding her place among her new family: DICE, and grows closer with another member in particular over a small game of cards.

MEGUMI WAS LOST.

Only the faint streetlights and the passing figures illuminate her path as she walks alone, neon lights abrasive against her squinting eyes. The cold chill of the puddles gathering at her feet has finally seeped through her skin, eliciting a shiver.

She doesn't even realize she's shaking until her hat drops and she has to pick it up. The sunhat is practically ruined by the muddy water, the edges had already begun to grow frayed. Her hands gripped the rim, dirtied by the ground.

There wasn't any rain forecasted for that night. It was supposed to be clear skies all throughout. Her socks were wet, that's what she got for wearing them with sandals, wasn't it? She walked a lot more than she expected that day.

Megumi was lost.
Megumi was scared.

The dark of night looms overhead, no stars lighting the sky under the deep fog of the storm clouds and pounding rain against the pavement. The latter feels like it's louder despite the fact the worst part of the storm has passed.

Megumi was lost.
Megumi was scared.
Megumi wanted to go home.

But she doesn't know where to head. She doesn't know where home *is* exactly. North, east, south, west? It was all the same to her.

She isn't in Hakodate anymore, she doesn't know here like she knows Hakodate. Like she knows her neighbourhood and the familiar view of the ocean and shores. None of the same landmarks that she's been taught like the lines on her palms.

Being out in the rain is a far cry from watching it for hours in that same sunroom back at home. It's colder, more bitter, and it feels cruel, especially with the small cold nips from the wind.

Especially since she had handed off her coat earlier in the day to her father, the summer heat was far too hot for anything of the sort.

She should have asked for it back in hindsight.

Megumi was lost.
Megumi was scared.
Megumi wanted to go home.
Megumi was bitterly cold.

There had to be somewhere where she could at least get out of the rain. Megumi remembered most of the night in the lens of her own foggy, stinging vision on the brink of tears and the smell of the rain drops against the hot summer pavement: shivering, cold. The braids in her hair were starting to come apart, hair falling at her shoulders. She hadn't done it up tight enough (she remembers her brother showing her how to make it stay, but the anxiety rising in her stomach has made her memory blurry).

She hadn't held their hands tight enough.

Megumi was lost.
Megumi was scared.
Megumi wanted to go home.
Megumi was bitterly cold.
Megumi couldn't tell left from right.

She didn't know where she was.

All the colours, swirling together, the neon lights mixed together in a neon pink and blue blur hitting the rain drops from different sides.

Megumi felt as if she was walking through a movie set, or a painting. This was supposed to be the type of thing that only happened in movies, right? This kind of thing isn't supposed to be happening to her, right?

She hoped her rabbit would get fed that night. Her sisters liked Miriku enough to feed her, right?

She had been warned against going down dark alleys or even being out at night so late like this. Someone her age out at night is like painting a large target on the side of the building in front of the police: asking for trouble.

And a painted target she did see, in quite the literal sense.

There was a group of masked individuals holding colours of purple, white, black, red—she thought she saw some yellow and green cascaded along their hands that spread across the white, filthy sidewall, the new colours joining the already messy blur of white and red spiraling circles.

And she froze like a deer in headlights. She had a feeling this was something she wasn't supposed to see. She had clearly locked eyes with one of them. Oh no. They wouldn't have wanted to be caught, right?

Seen she was, despite every part of her screaming not to be. To run and hide. That something bad was going to happen if she stayed any longer. To scream fire and run like she had been taught to and hope to whoever's listening that someone would help her.

The call for fire never sparks.

One of the people in the group spoke up. Someone a bit lankier, but shorter than the rest of the group. "Hey, hey, it's okay. Are you alright?"

Megumi starts to open her mouth, spilling out some garbled explanation, sobbing. She didn't know where she was. Who are they? Where is she?

"Jack, you've scared the living shit out of her! Wooowww, good going!" One of the people in the group piped up. Near the front, a full face mask and a cape and… Shorter than the rest of the group. Purple hair, faded roots she couldn't tell the original colour of the hair.

"Sorry," the other man winced, shrinking back into the group.

"Hey. You know where you are?" The new boy asked, only needing to crouch down a bit to talk to her.

Megumi was only able to stutter out a slight 'No' between sniffles. She wanted to go home. She wanted her siblings back, she wanted her mom and dad back.

"Here. We're gonna make sure you're safe."

The tone of this boy's voice has flipped like a switch from abrasive to something.. kinder. She would have been tempted to call it almost uncanny if not for the fact she had just bawled her eyes out.

She could feel someone's eyes on her. From near the front of the group, someone taller than the boy. A girl with pigtails.

"Come on," he motions over. It's just about the softest tone Megumi would ever hear him use. "We'll bring you to our secret hideout, okay? *Real* exclusive."

And out of what she thinks in the moment is misplaced trust, Megumi follows them into the dark of night.

And she fits right in.

* * *

The sizzling pop of a party popper fills the air along with the coloured confetti sprinkling down onto the ground. Voices fill a room, or, rather, the trunk of a van, crowded with decorations (which Megumi is pretty sure were stolen from the 100 yen store down the street) and a group of people huddled around a cake, taking slices handed to them by the oldest girl out of the bunch. Megumi has heard she goes by "Queen" here, and she really hasn't called her much else. She's afraid it would be rude.

Everyone's unmasked. Honestly, she was pretty surprised at how some of them looked at first. She wasn't expecting such a childish face from their leader. She was honestly expecting them to all be scarred and worn down like in the gangsters you see in the movies, but now she thinks that was kind of silly of her to assume. They're all just.. kids. Like her.

She really doesn't know why she thought of them that way. They're… actually really nice. They haven't been anything but nice to her.

One of the people in the crowd, who Megumi now knows is Bishop or Hatsumi-chan as she calls him when the masks are off.

"Is that any way to treat your leader?" Another slice of cake is snatched in the most dramatic way he can muster. "The betrayal! I can barely stand it!"

Another slice is taken, and shoved right into Bishop's face. Laughter erupts from the group, and to someone's surprise, it ends there. To Megumi's, that is.

And in the corner two young women sit. One in a new, pristine uniform, near wrinkless, and the other with tears, worn in, soft.

The night had just dawned upon them, moon heavy and full in the sky. There's still a lot of time left in the day as the two of them watch the commotion from afar in relatively comfortable silence. No matter how much she might like and know the group now, she still isn't comfortable being the centre of attention. Or being close to it. The wall is a safety net.

* * *

The clamour of the group eases down when the door opens, and the rest of the group goes filtering through in waves, following Joker with the last remnants of cake still on his chin. Megumi doesn't even realize how much time has passed, stuck in her own thoughts.

She looks up to the clock sloppily hung atop the side back door. Ten minutes?

"Hey."

Megumi jumps a bit in her own skin, fork dropping from her hand before looking over.

"Woah! Didn't mean to spook you! But aren't you coming as well?"

Himari. Megumi is… familiar with her. Just as familiar as she is with the rest of the group. She's honestly stuck next to Queen for the past two weeks. Even then, Megumi doesn't even know much about her.

"Um... I think I'm fine."

Himari huffs.

"Well that's no fun! What are you going to do, just sit here?"

Megumi looks down at her cake, placing it to the side. For some reason, she's not too hungry now.

"I…" She stammers off. "I don't know."

"Well it's your day! You should have some fun with it." Himari quickly takes a seat beside her. "How about we play a game while those losers go out and do... Whatever they plan on doing today?"

Megumi knows she should be asking what this game exactly would entail, yet she thinks Himari is nice. She's been nice to her since she got here.

"Sure."

From her pocket, Himari takes out a deck of cards. Does she carry those around all the time?

"We're gonna play..." Himari taps her hands against the ground for a few minutes, the deck of cards still in hand. "Bullshit!"

"What's that?"

"You don't know?" Himari slams her hands against the floor. "Well! It's pretty easy. We just take turns going back and forth. You know the order cards go in, right? Ace, two, three, four that kind of thing?"

Megumi nods.

"Well, it's easy so long as you know that!" She explains, shuffling the deck of cards back and forth in her hands. "So we take turns placing cards face down, and they all gotta be in that order. So I could put down aces for the first turn, and you could put down twos! You can put down as many of that card as you want! So I could put down three aces if I wanted to."

She stops momentarily.

"BUT," she begins again. "If you don't get that two or three of jack or ten in your deck, you have to lie! If you think the other person is lying, you have to call bullshit on them! They have to pick up the deck! Whoever has the whole deck at the end loses."

Himari splits the deck into what she thinks is two even halves, placing one in front of herself and another in front of Megumi. This should be easy, right?

"Your day! You go first." Himari taps the floor where the cards were laid prior.

"Ace."

"Two."

"Two threes."

"Bullshit!"

Megumi flips over the deck, and the girl across from her silently curses to herself as the cards on the deck are revealed to be two threes.

"Damn it!" Himari takes the few cards built up into her hand.

Megumi covers her face with her hand. She's smiling so much. It feels good to let herself revel in a few victories, but she shouldn't let it get to her head, should she? She knows better than ever now when things seem great it can be taken from you in a split second.

* * *

Himari once again begins their match.

"Ace."

"Two."

"Three."

"Four."

"Two fives!" *This actually is pretty fun*, Megumi finds.

"Six."

The back and forth continues, the two girls rotating their cards back and forth until they come to a rather peculiar play.

"Four queens!" Himari proudly places the cards face down onto the deck. Megumi has a queen.

"Uhh... B.S!" Megumi pipes up.

"Come on, come on you can say it! Not like your parents are here or anything." Himari smirks, "I won't tell."

"Bull…" Megumi pauses, swallowing. She's never sworn before. She was pretty sure the one time she saw her sister do it she got in big trouble for it. It feels impolite, informal, rude.

Scanning the room, left right with her hand midway down the cookie jar that will soon fall upon the ground with a deafening crash. She is going to get caught and she is not going to hear the end of it. She is going to get scolded *so badly* for thi—

"Bullshit!"

Yet nobody comes to scold her, and she's only met by a round of applause by the other woman.

"Baby's first swear!" Himari runs towards a small box, shoddily labelled with English letters Megumi can barely make out. "Think this calls for a celebration!"

"Didn't get the chance to use one of these, did'ja?" A party popper is handed to Megumi from the box with no haste. "*Come-on-come-on-come-on!* It's your party! You can celebrate!"

Megumi takes the popper in her hands, pulling the string down and a pop erupts.

"Now! Since you didn't get to pick yours out… you need a name!" Himari claps her hands together.

"I… have one though?" Megumi raises an eyebrow. Does she need to change her name? She thought this group was just committing petty crimes not anything she'd have to—

"Code name! Don't worry, you don't gotta change your *actual* one, silly! Usually we pick 'em out with the rest of the group on your first mission, but since you aren't going, we'll just do it now!"

"Oh..." Megumi casts a glance at the ground.

"Nah nah! Don't worry! We usually don't give much of a shit with stuff like this! I mean, Queen got hers during a little bonfire."

"Oh, okay!" Megumi, as naive as she may be, knows it was probably more than a little bonfire. There was that big illegal fireworks show she saw reported on the news a year back. Was that them?

"I mean, you can consider this your first. Beating me at Bullshit is pretty hard!" Himari shines a bright smile Megumi's way.

"Queen…" Himari giggles. "Nah, sounds too grown-up for you. Plus Mayu-chan would have my head if I suggested we have a double… Confusing! Confusing!"

Himari rose from her spot upon the cold floor, scattering the cards across the floor, face up without a care as she continued to prattle on.

"...Young Queen… No... That sounds like a name a shitty rapper would have. Doubt you've got a Soundcloud. Gotta get something... regal! Yeah, really regal! You give off that rich kid air." Himari makes her way back over to the table where the near-gone left-overs of the chocolate cake remain.

"We gotta come up with a code name, right?" Himari tilts her head, resting it on her hand. Her nails are always that bright red. The polish never seems to chip except for the small bits she picks at. She lets out a sigh. "AUGH! Why is this so confusing? It was so easy with Joker and me and Jack! We're running out of card names."

"You have the whole deck," Megumi spreads out some of her cards across the floor.

"Yeah but who wants to be named *Twos* of all things?" Himari points her fork over at Megumi, her mouth still full of cake. All things considered, stuff like that? Megumi has had to get used to it over the past few weeks. She's used to being scolded for that kind of behaviour, "Would *you* want to be called Twos?"

"Not... really," Megumi replies.

"Exactly. Twos *sucks* as a name."

Himari performatively puts her hand on her chin, pacing back and forth, humming to herself until she turns on her heels towards Megumi, snapping and pointing at her.

"How about Princess?" Himari giggles.

The room goes quiet, and Megumi stares at the ground in a moment of consideration. *Princess… Princess, princess, princess.* She repeats the title in her head over and over again until she settles, meeting Himari's eyes.

"Yeah," Megumi nods. Yeah, that does sound good to her.

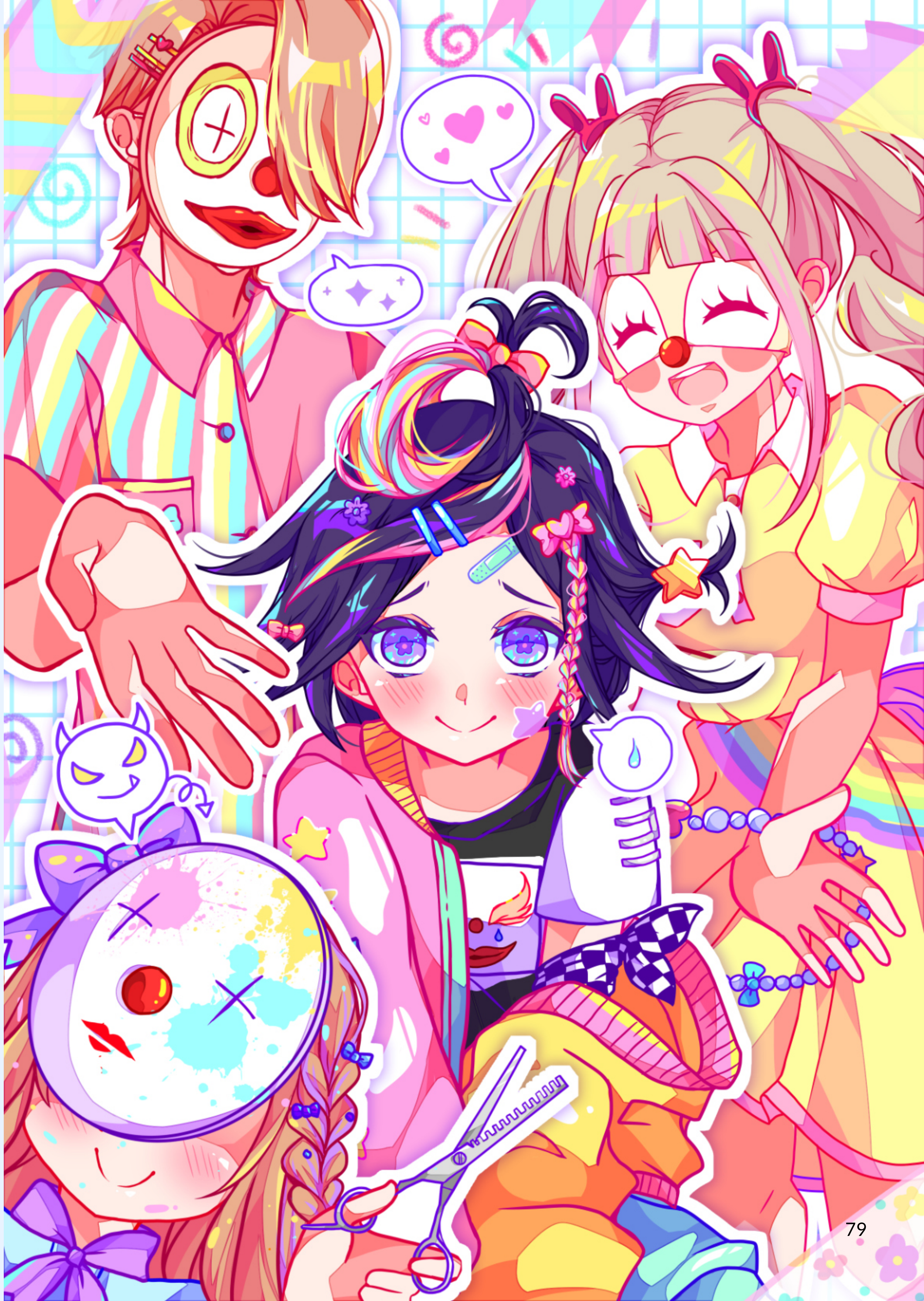
"Just wait until you have to paint your mask. Joker likes to paint 'em sometimes, trust me he can do a good job *if* you trust him. Buutttttt it's always an option to do it yourself. I mean, I did paint my own…"

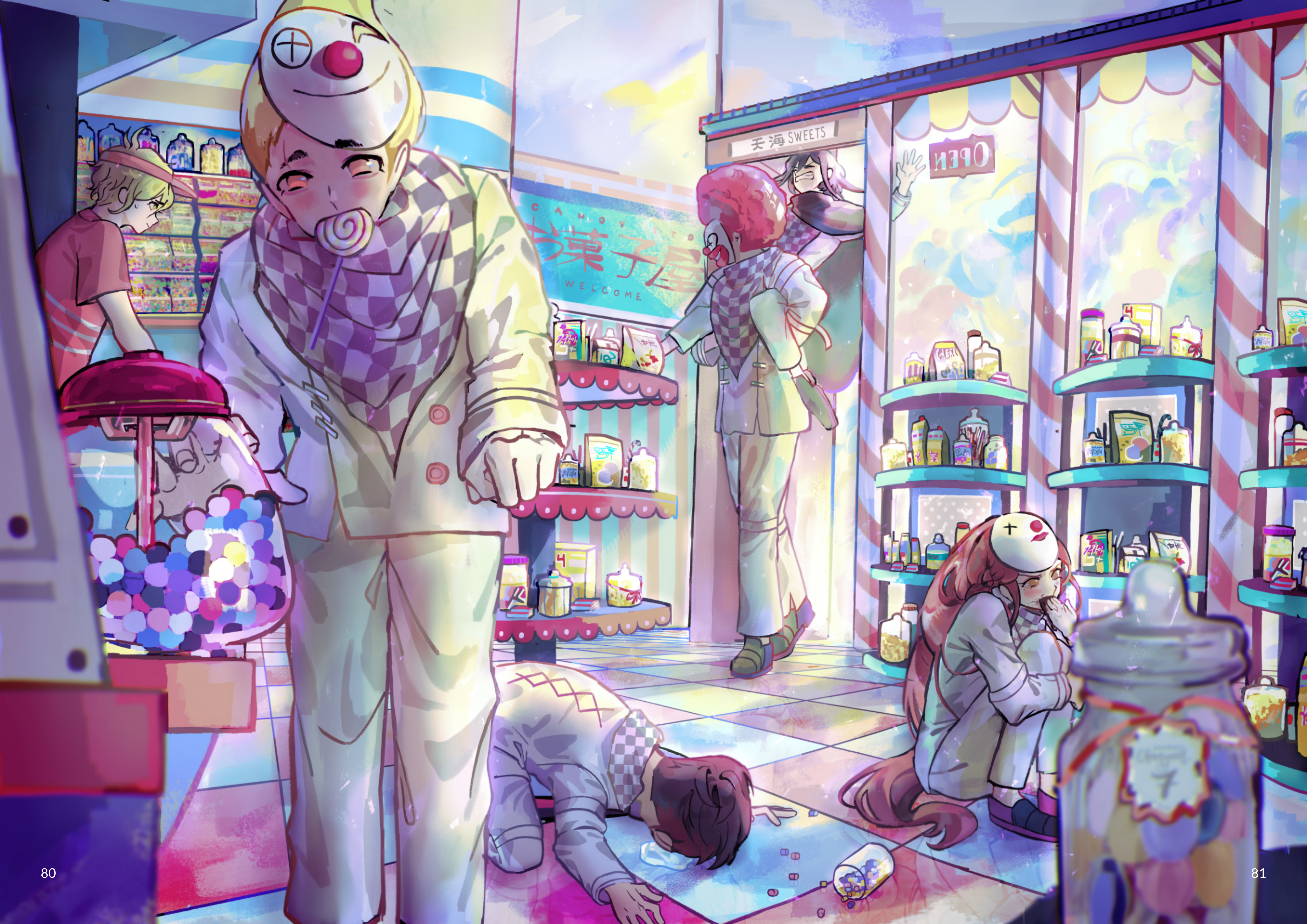
Himari's voice fades into the background as Megumi tunes into her own hands, staring down at the lines. Thinking. Smiling.

Megumi was lost. Was and is still in an odd, funny little kind of way. The same kind of way that a graphic tee in an old lost and found gets picked up by someone who wants it. Or maybe she's more like those little lizard, aquatic creature things that she learnt about in class that came up onto the surface because they decided the land suited them better than the flowing glistening waters of the sea that once lifted them.

Whatever she's akin to, Megumi Kogane is found.

Megumi Kogane is found by family.

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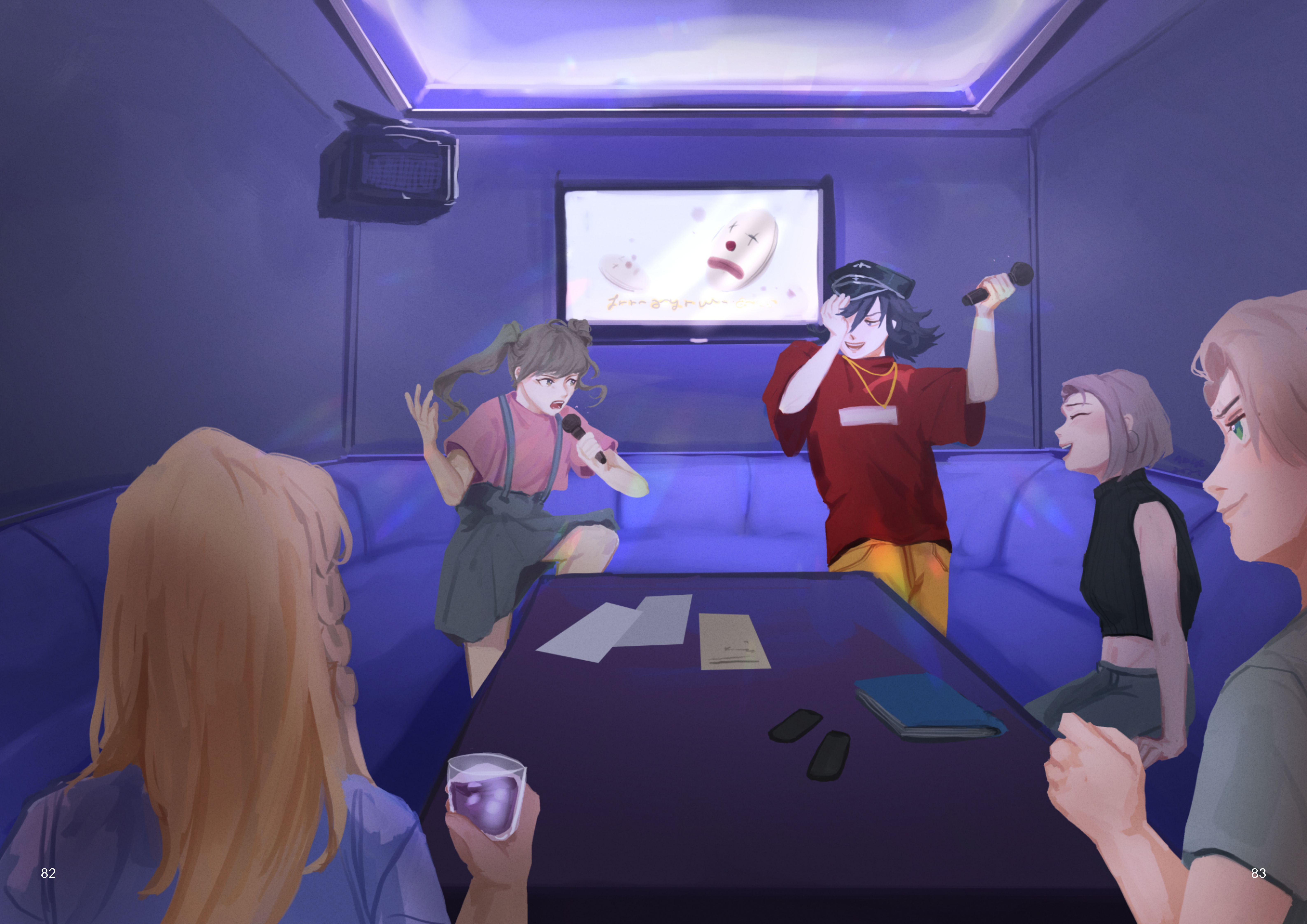


The Phantom’s Theorem

Written by Mamichigo

“Have you heard about the haunted orphanage up the hill?”

The ghost stories in this old village often started that way. Kokichi always thought those stories to be the most boring of them all—being the ghost in question really took the scare out of them. There was no fun in repetition, so, out of the goodness of his heart, he’d give them something new to talk about.

It was awfully easy to be a phantom thief when you’re already dead.

“If you could choose a feeling to have as yours, what would you choose?”

“**IF YOU COULD HAVE ONE THING**, what would it be?” Mayumi’s eyes bore into his as she asked.

Kokichi looked up from his slouched position, half-bored, half-tired in a way that couldn’t be fixed with something as simple as sleep. Besides, how do you even rest when you’re a ghost? Kokichi faked a sigh deep in his dead lungs and lolled his head back at an unnatural angle.

“Just one?” He shot back.

Mayumi put a hand on her hip and rolled her eyes; when she did this, she looked even more like the teenager who wanted to be seen as an adult. That kind of attitude, where someone postured to be above their peers, would usually grate on Kokichi. With Mayumi, however, he just found it amusing. Maybe because there was no one here for her to show off to. In this decrepit orphanage they had no choice but to call a home, there was not a single soul left besides their own. But this was just how they operated: a spider web of pretenses and fake acts.

Kokichi smiled over at her.

“I just had to ask!” He cheerily said. “I mean, how am I supposed to choose just one?”

“That’s a non-answer,” Mayumi flatly replied.

Kokichi hoisted himself up on the nearest table and kicked his feet in the air. He repeated the question under his breath a few times, hand to his chin.

“Ah, I know!” He snapped his fingers. “If I can only have one thing, then I’d say… I want everything.”

At Mayumi’s balking and general incredulity, Kokichi couldn’t help but giggle. He had to look away when his laugh got out of control at the mere sight of her. This was how he missed when Mayumi approached, then promptly pressed a knuckle to the top of his head. Kokichi fought to wrestle away, but her grip on him was unrelenting.

“That’s cheating, *leader*,” she spoke the nickname with enough venom to make him wince.

Kokichi stuck his tongue out. “I said ‘everything’. That’s only one word, so there’s no way I’m cheating.” He held up one finger for Mayumi to see. “I can count up to this much, at least.”

“You should be able to count higher than that, actually,” she grumbled. Being the rude person she was, Mayumi took his hand and forcefully lowered his finger. “Don’t be so silly all the time.”

Kokichi wiggled the fingers in her grasp and winked. “Unfortunately for you, that’s my defining trait.”

* * *

He couldn’t understand the fascination people held for the dead. It really wasn’t as interesting once you experienced it yourself, and watching a group of unknown people stumble into the empty corridors of the orphanage while cowering and elbowing each other really didn’t make Kokichi feel too charitable towards the living.

It was only him and Himari today, and he had felt victorious over seeing her finally show herself, as she often preferred to stay hidden. A shy smile appeared on her face when she spoke, quiet enough that Kokichi almost didn’t hear her. The sound of footsteps cut her off mid-sentence, and Himari quickly dropped the relaxed expression at the sight of the three strangers. Kokichi clicked his tongue and made a shooing motion at her.

“Ugh, guess I’ll have to scare them away. I really don’t like playing the scary ghost, so you better be feeling grateful for my generosity,” he said. When Himari blinked owlishly at him, Kokichi sighed. “Just go hide for a bit, I’ll take care of it. You don’t need to go disappearing or anything, so don’t! You’re under strict leader’s orders, understood?”

Himari nodded and leaned closer to him. She cupped a hand around her mouth so her words carried, but it did little in amplifying the quiet tone of her voice. “I’ll leave it to you, leader.”

Kokichi watched her walk away with a hand on his hip. Once she dipped out of sight, he turned around. The group was close enough now that he could hear the trail of their conversation, but Kokichi didn’t bother absorbing the words.

“What now, huh?” Kokichi grumbled and stalked after them. It was easy not to make a sound, being a ghost and all. “You’d think a guy could get some peace and quiet around here after dying.”

Whoever said anything about death being peaceful was a goddamn *liar*.

Scaring others was boring business. A few ominous sounds here, a cold touch on the shoulder there. Suddenly they would be running without much work from Kokichi. It was almost amusing how easy it was to terrify the living, but it lost its appeal once Kokichi realized their reaction was always the same. Still, he did promise he’d get it done. If only his deceased caretaker could see him now—try and say he was a selfish brat again, old hag.

(She hadn’t been old, not really. Kokichi couldn’t remember much from when he was alive, but he did remember her carefully combed hair, the only thing in the orphanage that looked shiny and healthy.

He remembered wondering if that was where all the frequently-disappearing donation money went.)

Maybe it was time to change things up a bit. Kokichi remembered the times he had accidentally fallen through walls while distracted, how his companions disappeared entirely for periods of time—to rest? Take a break from seeing everyone else? He wasn’t sure, Kokichi had yet to prod them about it. He winced when a particularly loud squeak broke him out of his thoughts; then, the grimace changed into a smirk. No day like today to try out new things, right?

Once the three trespassers came to a pause, Kokichi sneaked behind them and reached out. He only touched their back at first, but with a bit of concentration, he was able to push his hand inside. Instead of going the whole way through, however, it hit something solid, and burning cold to the touch. Kokichi frowned as he wrapped his hand around it. That shouldn’t be an organ, right? That’d be gross. Besides… Kokichi peeked at the unchanging expression on the person’s face. Surely they’d be feeling it if Kokichi had somehow put a hand inside their heart or something. With that settled, Kokichi shrugged and pulled. Whatever it was, it came loose without a fight.

It also melted in his hands, but stayed firm enough so it didn’t seep through the cracks of his fingers. Kokichi rolled his hand around and the transparent liquid sparkled like jewels. It was easy to forget about the intruders with this new shiny mystery having quite literally dropped into his waiting palms. For good measure, Kokichi kicked the shin of one of them, hard enough to make them scream in fear and run for the exit, closely followed by their companions.

Kokichi swerved around. “Hey, Himari!”

Not even a full second later, Himari touched his arm, making Kokichi leap in fright. He held tighter to the liquid when it almost spilled over with the sudden movement.

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack?! I didn't know you had such a mean streak in you."

Himari tipped her head to the side, then motioned him to come closer. Kokichi shuffled over and offered her his ear.

"You're not usually this much of a scaredy-cat," she deadpanned.

The contrast between her voice and her words made Kokichi snort, though he was quick to cover it up with a pout. If he had the free hand for it, Kokichi would've pinched her for the insolence. He settled for sticking his tongue out at her instead.

Himari gently turned his head (and tongue) to the other side and leaned over to peer at what he was holding. She tried to dip a finger into it, but Kokichi held his palm above his head and narrowed his eyes.

"What did you find?" Himari asked innocently.

"Well, I don't *know*, that's why you can't just touch it all willy-nilly." Kokichi sniffed, then added, "Stupid."

"But you're touching it right now."

"That's because I'm special."

They stared at each other. Himari just held her hands behind her back as she rocked on the balls of her feet. She shuffled closer. When Kokichi took a step back, she gave the tiniest of smiles, eyes expectant.

"Ugh, fine!" Kokichi dropped to the ground and sat cross-legged. He extended his arms towards Himari. "If something bad happens, you're the one who's going to explain it to Mayumi. I already have to deal with her enough as it is."

Himari didn't even nod in acknowledgement, two fingers already dipped into the liquid. She stirred it around and watched how it moved in slow circles. When no change presented itself, Himari raised her hand to eye level to stare at it. Carefully, she gave it a delicate sniff.

Kokichi huffed and moved to get a closer look himself, thinking that maybe it'd be different now that someone else had touched it, shoulder brushing against Himari's.

His train of thought was interrupted by a shrill scream.

He jumped so far he got caught in one of the cracks in the ground. He blinked up at the ceiling. Only when he looked back at Himari, who was covering her mouth with both hands and half-hiding the bright color of her face, did Kokichi realize the scream had come from her.

"I didn't know you even had that kind of voice in you, where were you hiding it?!" Kokichi patted his clothes down as he sat up once again. The liquid he had been holding went flying in his surprise and got all over his clothes. "Ugh, gross."

Himari lowered her head in shame. "I'm sorry," she said—or rather, Kokichi chose to believe the mess of mumbled words that came from her mouth was an apology. After a moment, she took a peek at Kokichi to make sure he wasn't hurt. "You're also very jumpy," she pointed out.

Kokichi narrowed his eyes. "And what are you trying to say, hm?"

"You usually aren't."

"Well, neither are you, but here we are," Kokichi threw back without missing a beat.

They exchanged a look. *Ooooh*, right. Neither of them usually acted like this. Right now, the only different factor was the liquid Kokichi had stolen from that stranger. Hadn't that person been particularly scared, standing out even among their frightened companions?

"Did I steal his fear?" Kokichi mused.

"Is that possible?" Himari asked with a frown of her own.

"We shouldn't be able to exist either, so that's not important. We need to focus on the facts." Kokichi sprung to his feet. "I need to run some tests, tell the others I went out!"

Kokichi didn't hear Himari's response, nor did he look back at her, but somehow Kokichi knew she waved his way up until he disappeared through the door.

* * *

First, Kokichi went to Youta. He had a good head on his shoulders, and frankly was the only one out of their weird little group that still had all his screws in that brain of his.

"If you could choose a feeling to have as yours, what would you choose?" Kokichi asked, failing to take into account how much Youta could *talk*.

"That's an intriguing question, and it begs further reflection on what makes an emotion," he started. "Let's choose happiness as our example. What does it mean to be 'happy'? It could be satisfaction over a well done task, or content in times of peaceful quiet. Being loved generally makes us happy, but isn't love an emotion itself?"

"Youta—"

"So, where does one emotion begin, and the other ends? The possibility of separating them is what intrigues me the most."

"That's not what I asked—"

"Would acquiring one come interlaced with many other emotions, causing a domino effect? If so—"

"I'm leaving." Kokichi mumbled an excuse and ran away at record speed.

It was with exasperation that he realized he didn't even get an answer to his question.

Refusing to lose enthusiasm now, Kokichi asked each member of his group, though the rest of them were just as uncooperative. All it got him was the desire to pull out his hair one by one, so this little interview would have to be redone at a later time when Kokichi could bully them into being relatively normal for five seconds.

(Tsubasa specifically hadn't even looked up from where he was lying with his face to the ground.

"A nap," he had answered, without missing a beat.

"That's not a feeling."

"It could be."

Kokichi was this close to strangling him.)

Tired, Kokichi seeked out Mayumi as his last resort. Though she was often the most responsible one, she was also the kind to ask if he had hit his head whenever Kokichi came to her with this sort of question.

Warily, he slouched on the floor next to her. "So, what would *you* want?"

Mayumi looked up from the old book she had been reading. After a moment's consideration, she shut the book, though one of her fingers remained at the page she had been reading.

"Is this some sort of retribution for what I asked the other day?"

Kokichi bounced one of his legs impatiently. "No! I didn't even remember that anymore—" he did, actually, but it wasn't *important*—"I'm asking because I might be able to do something about it. I mean, at least if it's an emotion, and I can find the right person, and if I can get the timing right—"

"Okay, alright, slow down." Mayumi pressed two fingers against her temple and released a long-suffering sigh. "I'm not even sure what you're talking about—"

"Just hypothetically! You know, like when people ask what you'd do if you had a lot of money to spend or something."

She put a firm hand on his bouncing leg so it was forced to stop. "I said *calm down*."

Kokichi stared at the rings on her long fingers and pried one away for himself, with no resistance from Mayumi. He rolled it around his thumb and stared up at Mayumi, counting the seconds until she continued her sentence.

"And stop interrupting me."

"I'm not."

"Not anymore, you are not! Anyway." Mayumi tapped her index finger on her chin long and hard. Kokichi imitated her and earned a glare for his troubles. "Just one?"

"To start with, yes. Make it simple."

"I have no idea what you're planning…" Though she sounded skeptical, Mayumi continued to ponder on the question. She played with the hoops of her earrings as she always did when she had something weighing on her mind. "If I could have any feeling in the world…"

She retreated her hands, but left her ring in Kokichi's hand. She took a moment to gently blow Kokichi's fringe away from his eyes before she stepped back. She didn't look at Kokichi afterwards, eyes glued to the nearby window.

"The feeling you're doing enough."

Kokichi stilled. He looked down at the ring, too big on his bony fingers. He hummed quietly.

"That would be a hard one to track down," he warned. Kokichi hoped Mayumi couldn't hear the guilt in his voice.

She grinned at him. "Don't I know that."

Staring at the open way she smiled, Kokichi hopped down from his perch on the chair. He put the ring back in Mayumi's hand.

"I'll find it," he promised her.

✦ ✦ ✦

"Hey boss, I got you the stuff you needed," Tsubasa announced.

It was the only warning he gave before setting a huge sack of glassware down on the ground. Kokichi winced when they clinked together. A bottle rolled out of the overflowing sack; it crashed with a bang, the delicate glass flying everywhere as it shattered. Tsubasa only gave it half a second of his attention.

"There you go," he said.

Kokichi stared at the glass for a while. Well, someone would take care of it. Or they'd all collectively pretend it wasn't there. What was a little more debris when you lived in an abandoned building?

"More importantly, it's not *boss*, Tsubasa. It's Joker. Joker!" Kokichi crossed his arms. "I thought we had made that clear."

"We decided on codenames, like, two days ago," Tsubasa replied. "I don't hear you calling me Spades either."

Kokichi tilted his head. "Oh, I didn't? Silly me."

Kokichi lost interest in that line of conversation quickly when he caught a glimmer at the corner of his eyes. He squatted next to the heavy sack to get a closer look at the contents and whistled at the masterfully crafted little bottles. The crystal lids on top were somehow even fancier than the rest of the bottles.

"These are pretty good! I didn't think you'd actually go through with stealing all these. Maybe you all have the potential to be great criminals after all!"

"You did ask."

Kokichi put a hand under his chin as he looked up at Tsubasa. "Is that really all it takes to get you guys to do something? Aren't you eager to please."

"Well, yes."

Kokichi absentmindedly played with his hair. It would be so easy to manipulate these people. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he already knew this. With the way they gravitated towards Kokichi with attentive ears, hanging on his very word, it'd be impossible not to notice. But this was the first time Kokichi came face to face with the reality of that fact. He didn't speak for a moment.

"We should start making plans, then," Kokichi mused. "Picking a target should be time-consuming, but not that hard. The timing is our biggest problem. If we get it wrong, we might take the wrong emotion. Same if the target somehow realizes we're there before we can finish. We'd just end up with another goo of fear. Which, by the way, is gross."

He chewed on his thumbnail as scenarios spun through his head. "Is this even possible..?"

"Are you done?" Tsubasa asked as soon as Kokichi trailed off.

Finger still half in his mouth, Kokichi blinked at Tsukasa. "Huh?"

"I don't like repeating myself, so pay attention," Tsubasa instructed. "Megumi likes stalking people—"

"She prefers the term 'people watching', actually—"

"—so she knows a lot about the people in the nearest town. She wrote diagrams and everything, you should look at those later. Youta is good at, uh. Human relations or whatever. He came up with scenarios that would cause specific emotions, based on the information he got from Megumi. If we play our cards right, we could do this." Tsubasa was about to add something, but he blew his bangs away from his left eye and slumped. "There's more, but you can ask the others about it. Thinking about all the little details they came up with is giving me a headache already."

Tsubasa handed him a notebook. Kokichi took it and absentmindedly thumbed through the pages. He recognized Megumi's horrendous handwriting, illustrated with Himari's childish sketches of faces he had never seen before. A few more pages in, and the chicken scratch was replaced by Youta's elegant penmanship. Knowing his own handwriting was not much better than Megumi's, Kokichi felt almost envious over the precise strokes.

"You guys sure acted quickly," Kokichi commented, with a note of genuine awe in his voice.

"Well, yeah, you were looking all gloomy thinking of things on your own, so." Yawning, Tsubasa shrugged and rubbed at his eye.

How he always looked so tired, Kokichi would never know. Did ghosts sleep after all and he just missed the memo?

Tsubasa perked up a bit as he remembered something. "Ah, right. Himari wanted me to tell you to cheer up, by the way. It sounded like an order."

"Why didn't she tell me herself?"

"She's doing her disappearing thing."

"Right."

"Anyways, you heard the lady."

Tsubasa waved lazily as he left, and Kokichi watched him go, notebook squeezed to his chest.

Easy to manipulate, indeed. But, then again—was he much better? Kokichi wondered, a grin that refused to disappear plastered to his face.

✦ ✦ ✦

"I know we decided to do something easy for our first try, but really? This?" Kokichi stared at the two little figures drawn side by side with hearts surrounding them. "I don't want to crash some stupid couple's date! Which one of you even came up with this?"

Kokichi stared at his group one by one, but mostly they just looked bored. With the exception of Megumi, who was hiding her giggles behind her hand—badly, might he add.

"Well, there's no point in going back now, might as well go for it," Mayumi pointed out. Everyone else nodded their assent.

Kokichi sighed and crumpled the sheet into one of his pockets. Not like those drawings would do him any good anyway. Plus, it *was* an easy operation. Find the couple, stealthily take the emotion from one of them while they were busy staring into each other's eyes or whatever, retreat and quickly put the goo in its flask. Easy peasy.

The whole scenario was so *boring*. Kokichi watched for a long time while they chatted animatedly with one another. At the end of their stroll, one of them plucked a wildflower and offered it to their date, eagerly putting it in their hair when it was accepted. That was the most basic, ridiculously mushy thing Kokichi had ever seen. Still, a job was a job.

It worked well in his favor that they were both facing away from him, so it was easy for Kokichi to stand behind them without being seen. Like before, his hand went in without resistance, through the back of the one with the flower in the hair. When Kokichi felt that familiar solid barrier, he grasped it and pulled it loose.

Hands cupped and quick on his feet, Kokichi left before they could tell the difference. He was quickly surrounded once he retreated and the goo (a faint yellow this time) was carefully transferred to its flask. Kokichi was lost in thought as he kept studying the residue left on his fingers.

Megumi, noticing this, was the first to deliver a kick to his ankle to get his attention. Kokichi bit down on a squeak and glared at her.

“What?”

“You’re quiet. Tell me what’s wrong,” she demanded.

Kokichi rubbed his fingers together and hummed. “I don’t think that was love. Or affection, or fondness, whatever you want to call it.”

Megumi stared at his fingers like she was considering trying it herself. “You messed up, then. You did a shitty job on your first attempt, it happens.” As an afterthought, she added, “Leader.”

Kokichi elbowed her in retaliation. “I didn’t mess up! We just didn’t predict things as well as we thought we did.” He remembered the perfectly cheerful smile on that person’s face as they received the flower, and smirked himself. “Oh, I get it.”

Under Megumi’s skeptical stare, Kokichi gesticulated with a flourish.

“It’s exasperation. Even though they looked like they were being all lovey-dovey. That’s *sooo* funny!”

Megumi’s eyes widened. “I’ll have to add that to my notes.”

“Stalker.”

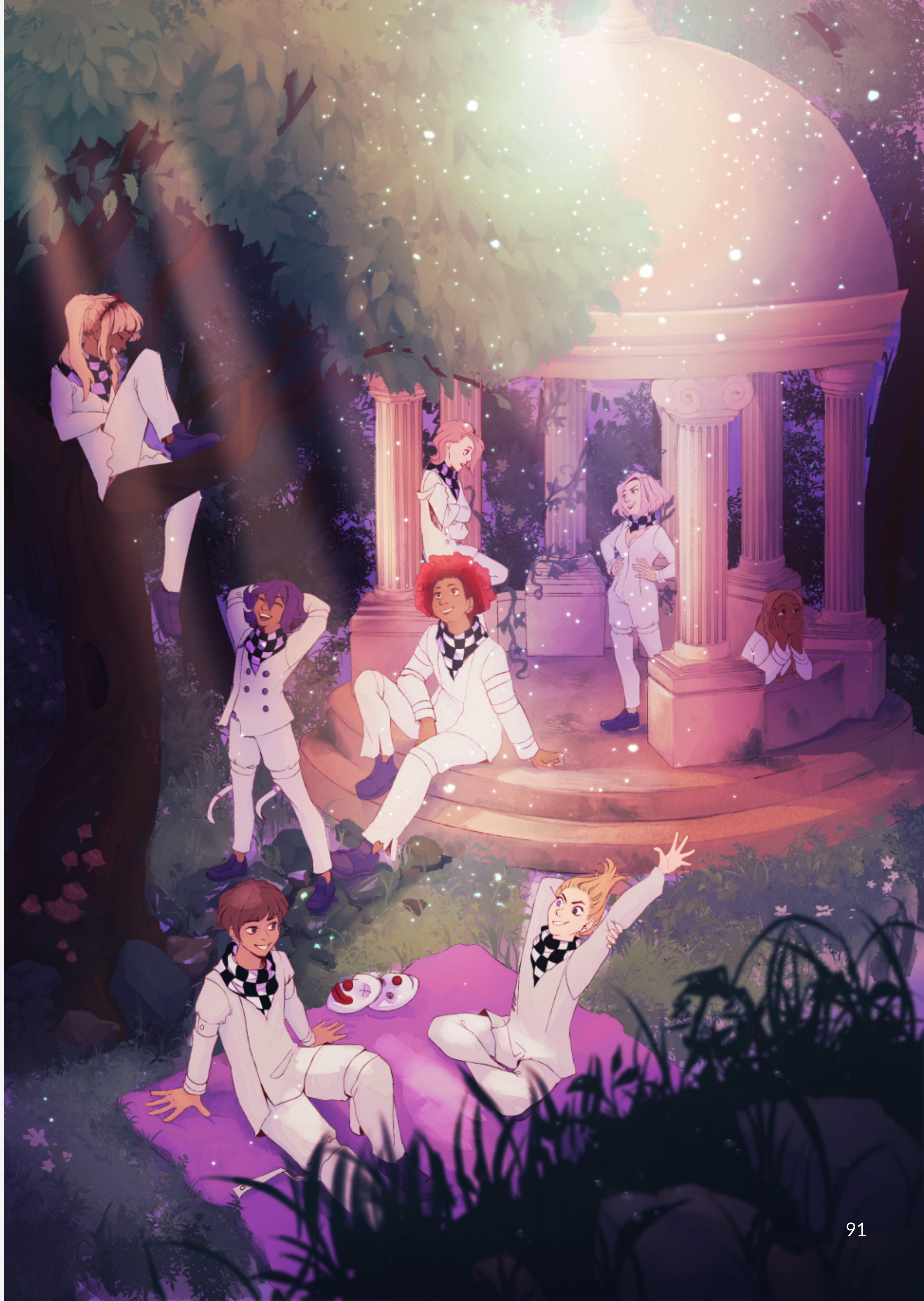
“Shitty leader.”

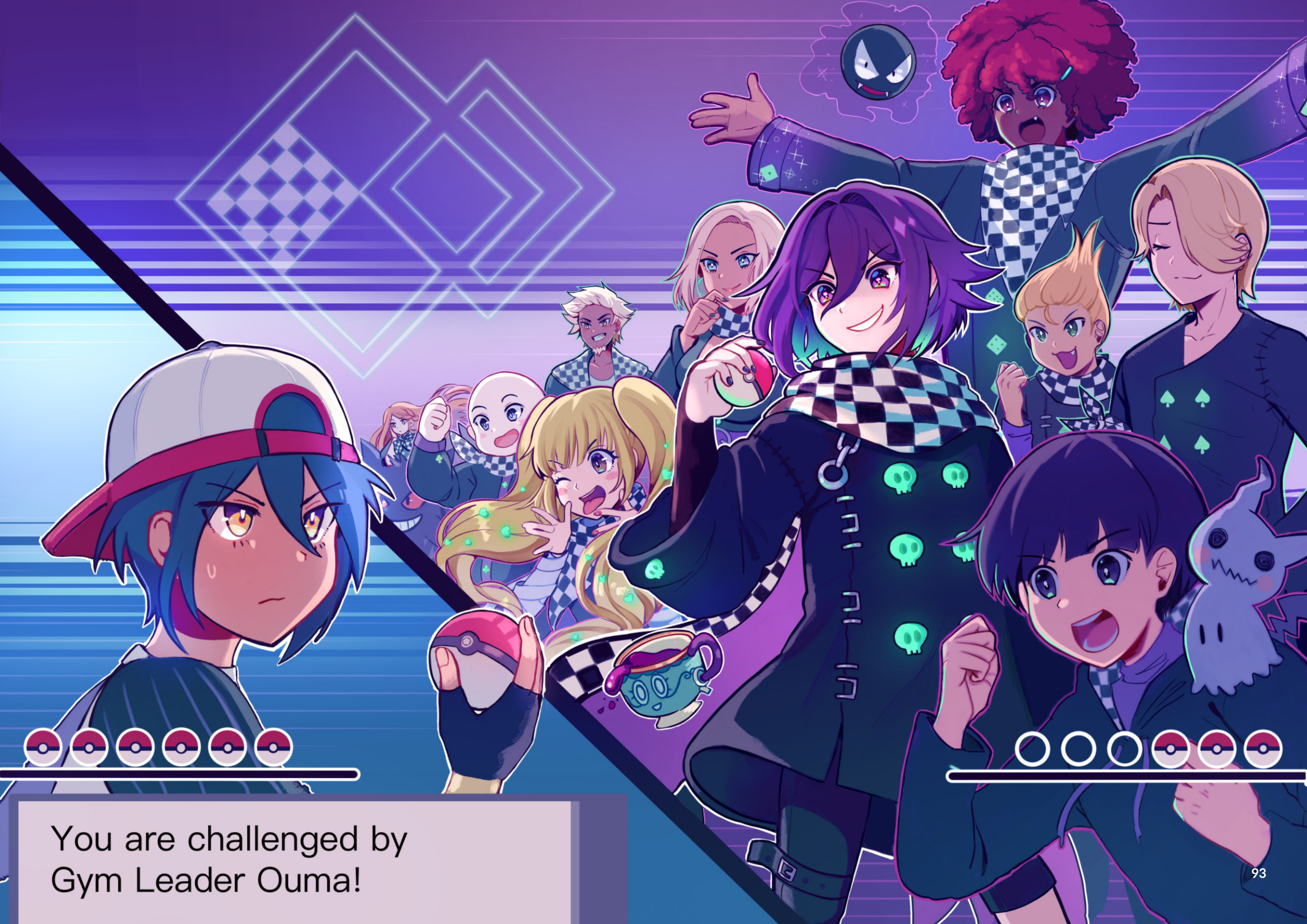
It was a quick track home after that, the group talking loudly with each other as the flask was passed around and prodded at. Himari stuck by his side when Kokichi fell back to watch them all. She tugged on his sleeve to get his attention.

“Is this what you wanted?” She whispered close to his ear so she could be heard over all the racket.

Kokichi glanced from her to the rest of the group. Faintly, he could hear their suggestions for their next “heist”, talking over each other in their excitement. His gaze fell on Mayumi, who was scolding everyone without ever pausing—not that that stopped them, but Mayumi wasn’t deterred.

“Nope.” Kokichi clapped his hands behind his back and tipped his body forward, grinning at Himari. “We’re just getting started.”

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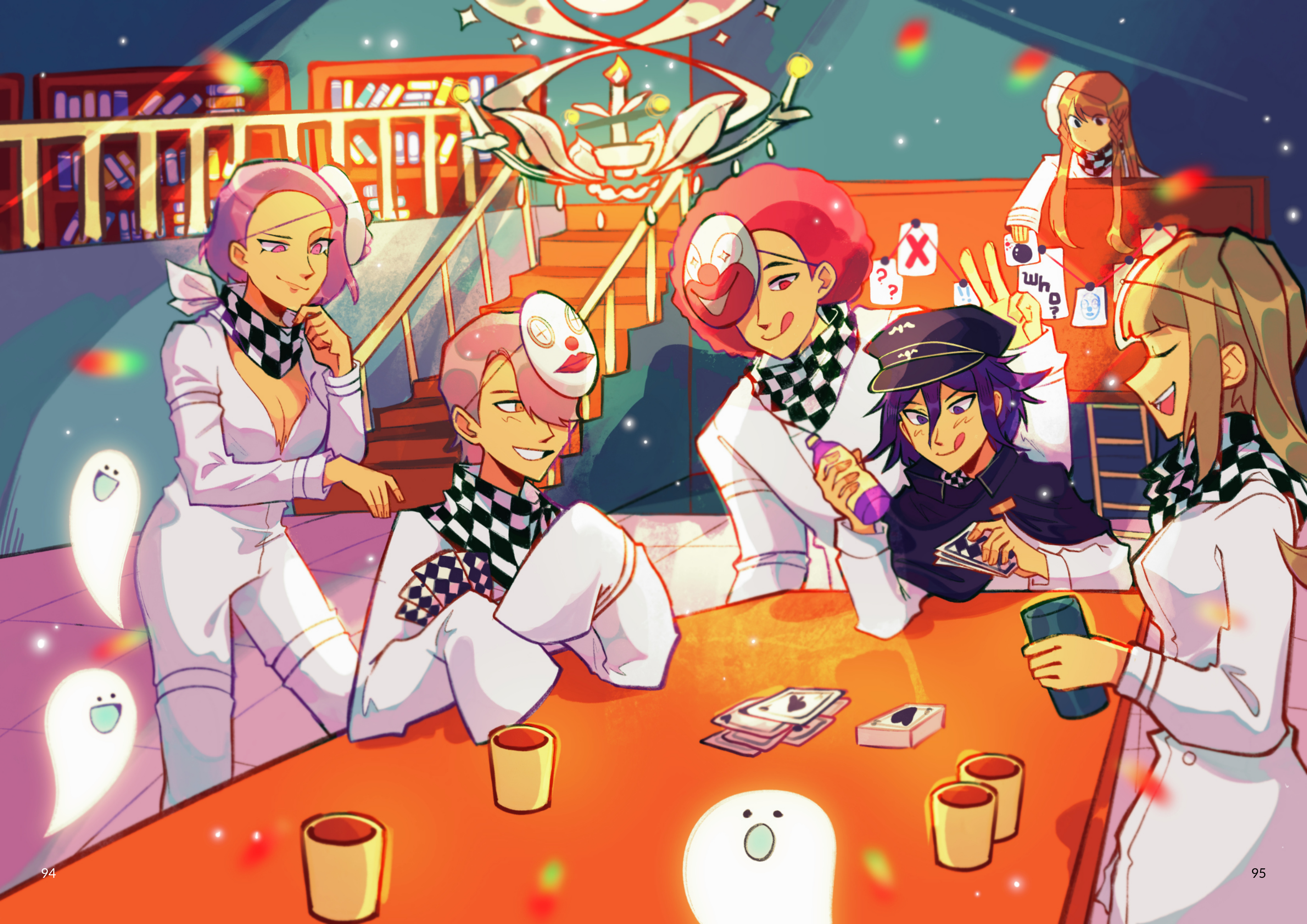
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Who?

Operation: EuryD.I.C.E.!

Written by thatsrightdollface

Kokichi Ouma’s diabolical clown gang, D.I.C.E., puts on a show for the Keeper of the Dead— they’re gonna win him back from the Underworld, like Orpheus tried to bring his lovely dead Eurydice home oh so long ago.

“Operation EuryD.I.C.E.”… You know, like Eurydice, but with D.I.C.E.!

NOW, YOU MIGHT'VE HEARD ABOUT how Orpheus sang so cunningly and sweet that even the cold-eyed Keeper of the Dead nodded along to the music. Maybe. A lot of people have. Orpheus tried to win his poor lost wife back after she got bitten by a snake and died in the night, it’s said; he stumbled at the last minute and broke the rules of his deal, so she flickered away like her soul’d run out of batteries.

Bye, Eurydice. Sorry.

But have *you* heard about that time the clown gang D.I.C.E. juggled for the Keeper of the Dead themselves, trying to persuade and/or annoy her into handing over their beloved ringleader? They didn’t play *quite* the same game as dear old Orpheus with his lyre, but it was close enough that there are still folders labeled “Operation: EuryD.I.C.E.!” lying around D.I.C.E. headquarters, probably buried under costume store receipts, plastic-y kids’ meal toys, and empty Panta bottles. The joke really only works if you write it out — “EuryD.I.C.E.” Get it?

No, you haven’t heard that one yet? You didn’t know the mighty Keeper of the Dead ever *actually* struck any deals with the same clown gang once wanted for filling a Togami Corporation boardroom with Jell-O?

Let’s get started, then.

The D.I.C.E. gang had ten members, in those days — or ten thousand, depending on who you believed — and so they also had at least ten different answers for how to break into their secret headquarters. Those clowns had ten different answers for whether the black-and-white checkers on their uniform scarves were meant to be harlequin-y or chessboard-y, too, and what the best Panta flavor was, and who had the dubious honor of being their Supreme Leader’s favorite henchperson.

Really, everybody knew Kokichi Ouma’d never had a favorite member of D.I.C.E. They were all his family, and are his family still. Kokichi loved D.I.C.E., and D.I.C.E. told their leader, “Aw. You’re such an infuriating little brat! We’d follow you to the ends of everything.” They said it in a birthday card alongside about ten thousand forged signatures, to be nice and specific.

When Kokichi Ouma died, notorious D.I.C.E. member Himari Kaneko was waiting in a getaway van down the street. She was chewing bubblegum and holding mostly-very-still so her teammate Youta could practice drawing a clown-inspired graffiti design on her arm. Himari and Youta were supposed to wait for a signal, and then they were gonna come swooping in, van careening over the edge of the curb. They’d crank the roof trampoline open — a new feature D.I.C.E. had added, you impressed? — exactly as Kokichi, Tsubasa and Mayumi came jumping one by one out of the very tall, very important building where they were playing their latest prank.

It had been a while of waiting, now, though, and the signal still hadn’t come. Himari had already attempted to read Youta’s future in his palm, and finished the latest issue of that *Luminary of the Stars: Kaito Momota!* comic series she liked, and texted a bit with other D.I.C.E. members who were having a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card tournament back home. She scratched at her head, getting her pigtails sort of lopsided, and then remembered she wasn’t supposed to fidget. She grumbled about Youta’s markers tickling against her arm, and he assured her he was nearly finished with the jack-in-the-box part of this latest design, whatever exactly that meant.

“Maybe we should scoot a little closer,” Himari said. “Maybe our connection’s bad, over here, and the boss already sent the signal. If we miss our cue, we’ll have to do the —”

Do the dishes, Himari had been about to say. But then the circus music signal crackled alive over their van speakers, as if it had been lying in wait. It didn’t run just once, though, like it was supposed to — it ran again and again, a dizzy, rollicking loop, and that was *wrong*. Kokichi was such a precise, careful leader, usually, despite the crumpled paper and soda spills he left around their headquarters from day to day. Himari trusted he’d remember how to cheer her up when she needed it, the same way she trusted he would play the signal exactly as he’d promised.

Himari met Youta’s gaze, then, and she saw her own uneasiness mirrored in his face, his slack double-chinned jaw, his searching eyes. Youta pulled his clown mask over his face — hiding his fear — and drove maybe a little too quickly to the agreed-upon spot. Himari shoved the van’s roof open, heartbeat shuddering sickly in her head. Her palms were slick on the lever, cranking out the trampoline, and that circus music signal kept on swinging around her. It was joined by emergency sirens, soon enough. The police were here. An ambulance, too.

Tsubasa and Mayumi jumped down into the getaway van, just as planned, but Kokichi... D.I.C.E.’s own Supreme Leader, their ringmaster, their best friend... was wheeled away on a stretcher. Neon pink blood seeped into a cloth draped over his face. One of his hands was hanging limp, swinging like a puppet string without any snickering showman to dance it around, anymore. His flippy purple hair was hidden, and his knowing eyes, too, but Himari would’ve been able to tell it was him just from his uneven scuffed-polish fingernails.

“I got caught, hiding my last snake-in-a-can,” Tsubasa said, voice dull, disbelieving. This latest prank had involved lots of such toys, little cans that *said* they had mixed nuts or candy inside, but fake snakes exploded out when a person opened them. The higher-ups at this corporation had been developing on land formerly set aside for an endangered species of snake, as Himari understood it. Kokichi enjoyed messing with people who swung their power around all supervillain-y like that. “I kicked a trash can over, and a security guard heard me. We were — we were in the CEO’s office, so, you know. Top-clearance. Retina scans, fingerprints. Kokichi shoved me into a vent... he ran out to distract the guard himself. Told me to find Mayumi and get to you, ASAP.”

“We heard him teasing the guard,” Mayumi said. “We thought he’d be right behind us.”

Tsubasa and Mayumi hadn’t hit the signal button by the time they heard this guard’s footsteps thundering after Kokichi… and then more guards joining him… and then a visceral, world-shattering crunch. Kokichi had been tased while balancing on a balcony railing, getting ready to duck down to one of the lower floors. Eurydice was bitten by a snake as she slept, and, well, Kokichi Ouma fell with a snake-in-a-can toy still clutched in his hand. He fell through the empty air, down far too many levels’ worth of office building, and he splattered apart on the classy tile mosaic along the entranceway floor.

This had been a simple prank, by D.I.C.E.’s standards. But no matter how much larger than life the boss had seemed, Kokichi still needed someone to sign for his ashes. A person only had to get caught once, right? Eurydice’d only needed to roll over at the wrong time once, too, scaring the crap out of just one snake.

Himari washed carefully around Youta’s jack-in-the-box practice art on her arm for days and days, after losing Kokichi. It was like maybe part of her could stay how she’d been before it happened, if only she kept the ink from running down the drain.

When Eurydice died, Orpheus’s lyre felt too heavy in his hands and all his music became mourning for her. When Kokichi Ouma died, it didn't take long for his gang to shift gears from "Operation: Snakes for Playing!" to "Operation: EuryD.I.C.E.!" What else could they do? If there was any chance D.I.C.E. could bring their Supreme Leader up from the Underworld, they'd take it. Wouldn't you, in their oversized clown shoes?

There were plenty of ways to reach the Underworld, first off. Everybody knew Hermes brought most of the dead to the Ferryman at the edge of the River Styx, and he was God of Travel just like he was God of Thieves and Liars and All that Good Stuff. Hermes slipped himself shortcuts pretty much everywhere, and all D.I.C.E. had to do was find one he'd left in Japan. Trade a few favors, pull a few heists, maybe threaten a few disreputable zipper-masked anthropologists... standard stuff, really.

It was Tsubasa who finally discovered the nearest path to the Underworld: it was waiting in an alley behind a convenience store a few cities over. He hadn't been able to rest until he won D.I.C.E. a way, truth be told. Himari had been wrestling Tsubasa into hoodies whenever she found him shivering at his computer in the middle of the night for weeks, by that point — he'd spent most of his time hunting around sketchy Hermes Tracking websites. Himari knew Tsubasa blamed himself for their boss's death, though she *also* knew Kokichi would've stood on his tip-toes to ruffle Tsubasa's hair if given a chance. He'd have probably said something like, "If you don't stop beating yourself up *right this second,* I'm gonna take back everything I gave you in my will. I mean it!"

Tsubasa drew a purple-glitter-pen circle around that particular alley on a city map, and he pantomimed how they had to lower their van into an abandoned subway tunnel to reach the Underworld properly. Daichi... who Kokichi had appointed "In Charge" during the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* tournament while he was away... squeezed his teammate's shoulder and said, "Alright, then. Good work. Let's go."

Daichi made sure everyone brought their fake IDs and toothbrushes, just like he made sure they all got the chance to stay back at headquarters if they needed to. They *were* going into the world of the dead, after all, an ancient, primal place beyond any single human life. Every member of D.I.C.E. wanted to come, in the end, even if it meant driving through a tunnel for absolute ages, deeper and always deeper under the human world. The road shouldn't have been able to stretch down so far, but still... *but still...* it did.

The subway tunnel walls started out mucky and stained, but later on they became crumbly brick mixed in with shells from the other side of the world, and then dark, shifting kaleidoscopes of impossible stone, like midnight oceans in the shaky glow of D.I.C.E.'s headlights. The tunnel wasn't a human place anymore, by then, and soon enough Himari's gang ran out of instant noodles and chips from the convenience store up above.

A little while after that, the slime and rusty tracks both dissolved into grey water so cold it *should* have frozen. The van couldn't carry them any farther, then, but Mayumi had the idea to transform their roof trampoline into a colorful raft.

It was like a clown car, in a way — how many D.I.C.E. members could *you* fit on a wobbly trampoline raft under Japan? — and they paddled until the water fell away beneath them. D.I.C.E. landed in a groaning clown gang pile at the end of the Ferryman's ATM line, ready to exchange modern Yen for ancient gold so they could cross the River Styx.

The last ghost in the queue tried to hand Tsubasa a crystal tablet with "End of the Line!" engraved on it, but he shook his head and said, "No, uh, *we've* got an appointment with the Keeper of the Dead," like that was the sort of thing people could phone ahead for. The ghost shrugged, and D.I.C.E. tried to shake the cold out of their bones.

Himari flicked a spider off Youta's broad back, and her nail clicked against the little guy like it'd had a robotic skin, or maybe a frozen one. Kokichi was infamously scared of spiders — all insect-adjacent things, really. Himari wiped her hand off on her uniform scarf, but she still felt tiny legs skittering there. Did Kokichi have spiders in his shoes, or crawling along *his* back, just now, with no faithful henchpeople to chase 'em away?

Himari thought Kokichi would've been proud of his gang for even making it this far, whether he was shaking undead spiders out of his pockets or not. He might've hissed something like, "The Underworld's 'End of the Line!' tablet could've made a good souvenir... oh well. Nishishishi..." in her ear, trying to make her laugh even in this place for the dead. "We could've hung it over the couch like a stolen street sign!"

It's hard to say if anyone *else* has ever managed to pay the Ferryman of the Dead with arcade tickets, but — believe it or not — D.I.C.E. did, once. Apparently even chthonic deities could be won over by promises of snap bracelets and invisible ink decoder rings. D.I.C.E. bribed a ghost with balloon animals so she'd slip them past the Keeper of the Dead's patrolling mechanical two-toned Monocerberus hounds, too. The Monocerberus hounds circled, fangs already bright with neon pink blood, but Himari and her team crept right on through.

D.I.C.E.'s original plan had been to sneak around the back-ways of the Underworld, busting Kokichi out of death the same way they'd stolen him away from holding cells, but the Underworld didn't work like that. The Keeper of the Dead's throne room was as big as a universe when it needed to be, and whichever road you took led right into its unearthly stillness.

And so, D.I.C.E. found themselves standing at the foot of the Keeper of the Dead's diamond-and-oil, scabbed-blood-and-amethyst throne. Tsumugi Shirogane was serving as the Keeper of the Dead, and she was waiting for them. Had these silly mortal clowns *really* expected a goddess not to know they were here?

In case you don't know, Tsumugi Shirogane inherited her role from the goddess Junko Enoshima, in this particular story. You might've heard of Junko: she stepped fully-formed out of the dark at the core of everything because she was bored. She wanted to taste Despair, and the dead had their regrets to carry, still. Their pain. But the Underworld was a tedious place, and there were always new kinds of Despair to chase down among the living. So, Junko hired a proxy — an Imposter Goddess, or a deity in really decent cosplay — and it was that goddess... Tsumugi... who gathered D.I.C.E. up close to her throne and made a "Go on, then," gesture with her Junko-inspired gory razor-blade nails.

Himari glanced around, from one gang member's clown mask to the next, and swallowed hard. The air tasted stale, like emptiness and boredom stirred together and left to sit for lifetimes. D.I.C.E. was the loudest thing that had come here, possibly since time began. Mayumi had glowsticks strapped to her uniform belt, ready to start juggling multicolor light — Youta was discreetly shaking out a can of spray paint, and Himari knew he was thinking of designs to slip away and graffiti on the Underworld's chasm walls. He noticed her looking, and tapped a "Shhh" finger against the lips of his mask.

"So, you're the Keeper of the Dead?" Daichi asked the goddess on her throne. "Neat set-up you've got here. Love the creepy, abyssal decor and all... pick a theme and stick with it, that's what the boss would say."

"And you're here for this 'boss's' soul, aren't you?" the goddess replied. She had bones and rubies both clipped in her wavy blonde wig — she mimicked Junko Enoshima's voice so well, it was only a matter of time until she forgot her own.

"Aw, what gave us away?" Himari knew Daichi was trying desperately not to sound afraid. He was a ringmaster, here, when Kokichi couldn't be. He stood his ground, a couple steps ahead of the rest of D.I.C.E., shielding them, and stared the cosplaying goddess down through those cheerful diamonds on his clown mask.

Tsumugi sighed — a lingering sigh, a performance. It had been Junko's sigh before it was hers. "You know what happens next, don't you? It's quiet here. Give me a show."

And so D.I.C.E. did what clowns do best: it was time for a circus of all their greatest heists, a circus for the goddess of the Underworld. Daichi took a deep, smiling bow, and everybody hurried into place behind him. They were gonna act out that thing with the Togami Corporation's boardroom and the Jell-O, only with a little more *pizzazz* — Himari was planning to flip in as the comic book spaceman Kaito Momota and hire D.I.C.E. for a Mars-based treasure hunt before the adventure was over. Himari was a gymnast — she could twist all sorts of ways, like her insides went to rubber, and she could cartwheel a whole bunch of times in a row without tripping over her pigtails. She already had a Luminary of the Stars coat Kokichi had made her for Halloween, so the script kinda wrote itself, back when she'd been helping work out "Operation: EuryD.I.C.E. Plan B, For If We Get Caught."

Himari would be playing the Supreme Leader in another one of their skits, by the way — the one where D.I.C.E. adapted a jewel theft they'd gotten mixed up with into a cursed pirate saga. Youta would play Kokichi for a while, too, just like Tsubasa and everyone else. Daichi would swallow crackling purple fire; Mayumi would juggle her glowsticks so fast it seemed like she was melting into queenly, holy light.

D.I.C.E. would put on the best show they could, basically, pulling out all the knife tricks, all the half-floating enormous balloon animal monsters, all the tall tales with just a *little* truth waiting inside them, and in the end the goddess Tsumugi Shirogane would blink her crystal-studded false eyelashes and –

And yawn.

"Uh... so what?" Tsumugi asked D.I.C.E., when they went still. "Orpheus played his lyre and the stars shook loose to dance for him. Korekiyo Shinguji brought me one hundred souls in exchange for his sister, tied up all pretty with a wet red rope. Those things were real. And this? This is —"

"Good thing we're not done yet, then, isn't it?" Daichi interrupted, gritting his teeth. Except... um... that *was* all they'd practiced.

D.I.C.E.'s stories got even wilder, then — lots of cobbled-together lies, lots of improv. Himari played along, at first, but then she found herself drifting to the back and watching her team. There was such horrible desperation in their voices, as they threw themselves into these new lies; there was such furious love, seeing how D.I.C.E. refused to give up even now that the Monocerberus hounds were slinking in from the infinite halls around them.

Maybe the last straw was remembering that Youta's jack-in-the-box design had completely faded from his arm, by now; maybe the last straw was seeing Tsubasa lift off his clown mask and swipe some angry tears from his cheek.

"Keep your chin up," Daichi murmured to Tsubasa, nudging him gently. "Remember — for the boss, anything."

Yeah, that's right.

For the boss —

Anything.

Himari squared her shoulders, rolled some stiffness out of her neck, and sent herself front-flipping as fast as she could, head over heels until she was staring right up at Tsumugi on her throne, so close she could've spat in her stilettos. Himari threw her arms wide and made her voice as huge as it needed to be — not quite as huge as that godly throne room, not quite as huge as a universe. It was only a clown's voice, after all. Only human.

"You want something *real*, Goddess?" Himari asked. "We're here for Kokichi Ouma because he's our family. Because our hideouts feel like soda without carbonation, after losing him... because the world's a joke without a punchline now that he's gone. That's all, really. Yeah, that's all!"

D.I.C.E. echoed that truth, each in their own voices. They wanted Kokichi back because who *else* knew how to transform their arguments into playful banter, like alchemy — they wanted Kokichi back because who else would keep their secrets, and cheer on their art, and teach them how to get dates by tying somebody at rock-paper-scissors a hundred times in a row. There was only one mortal who had ever lived that could fill their Supreme Leader's rubber horse mask. Or his shoes. Either way.

"*D.I.C.E.* does the stealing around here. Not fate, not even death," Mayumi said. She winked at Himari, and... looking at her... looking at her gang, her circus, her family... Himari thought she knew how this show needed to end.

When Kokichi Ouma died, the notorious D.I.C.E. member Himari Kaneko had been sitting in a getaway van, waiting for the jaunty carnival music signal to finally come. But now... moments before Kokichi Ouma came back to his henchpeople, tsk-ing at their bruises when *he* was the one who had only just died... Himari had a snake-in-a-can toy tucked in her coat.

"You know what else? The *real* truth, inside that other truth?" Himari crowed. "If we can't have our Supreme Leader back, we're gonna take over the whole Underworld. Using *this!*" She held up Kokichi's snake-in-a-can toy as defiantly as she could, here. She struck a final "Ta-da?" pose, and felt as her team went "Ta-da!" back on either side of her, like an answer, like love returned, like nobody saw the Monocerberus hounds clicking ever closer, except... obviously... everyone did.

The Keeper of the Dead laughed, hearing Himari's final truth. It was a ludicrous image, to be fair, conquering eternity with a toy. She looked surprised at herself — like she hadn't laughed since she'd first pinned on her divine wig cap and started going by "Junko Enoshima."

"Well, your boss *has* been causing a lot of trouble around my realm," the Keeper of the Dead said, when she smoothed down her cobwebs-and-leather skirts and gathered back some of her composure. "He keeps sneaking out to prank the Furies and steal godly soda from the heroic dead in Elysium. Hm. I guess you can keep him for a little longer yet."

You'll all be back here, soon enough.

D.I.C.E. would just have to see about taking their show to the Underworld officially, when the time came. If their boss could prank the Furies all on his own, imagine what he could do with the rest of his gang by his side! Operation: Tame Prometheus's Eagles, right?

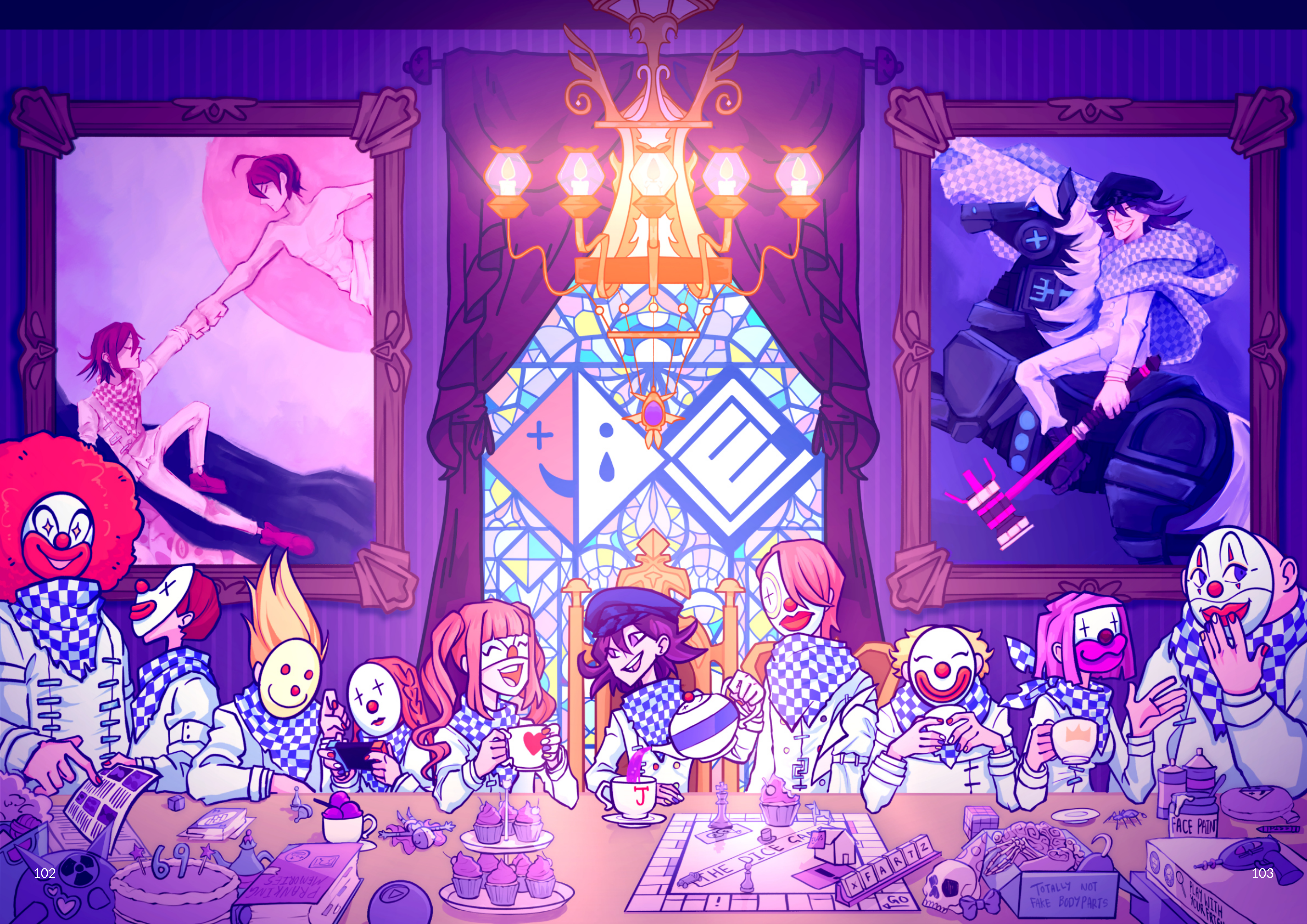
For now, though, Himari slid the snake-in-a-can toy back into her coat, and the Keeper of the Dead had her Monocerberus hounds drop Kokichi back on the other side of the River Styx. Tsubasa held out an awkward hand to help the boss to his feet, and this time it was Daichi's turn to brush some tears away.

Kokichi whispered, "Thanks," into Himari's ear, and held obediently still while she checked his back for spiders. He hugged Mayumi tight, and said, "Whoa! Hey, now," when she spun him around like one of her glowsticks. Kokichi laughed, and it was just like his laugh from before he knew the taste of death. Ghosts watched them warily from the Ferryman's ATM line, some shuffling closer, some glancing away.

"Everybody ready?" D.I,C.E.'s Supreme Leader called.

Okay —

Let's go home.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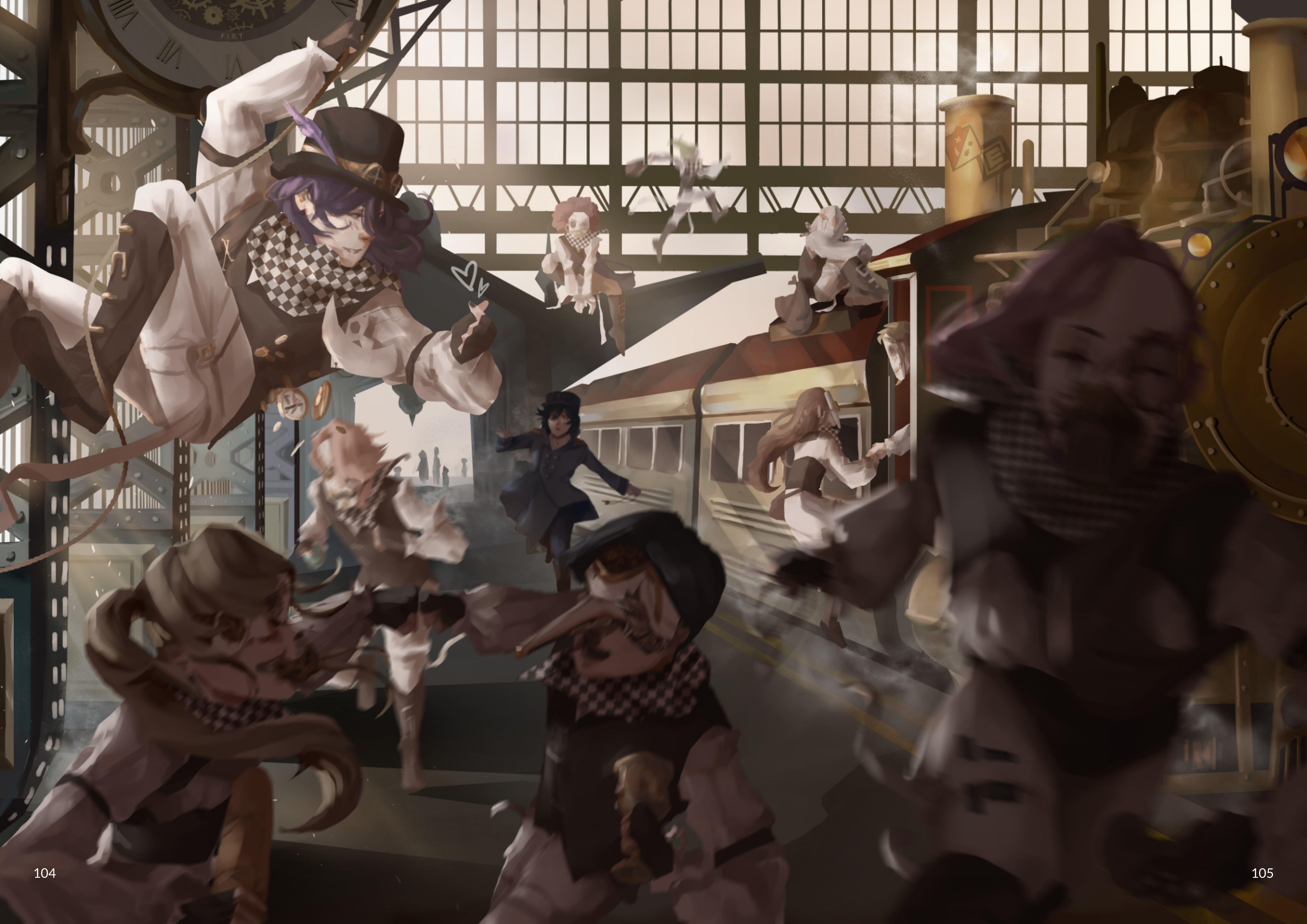


A New Emotion Called “Hope”

Written by themaybelltree

DICE, now secret agents for the Future Foundation infiltrating the Remnants of Despair, are happy together. Safe together. But all good things come to an end. Season 53 of Danganronpa is casting, and the Remnants have their eyes on their faithful leader, Kokichi Ouma. When they discover this, Kokichi makes the ultimate sacrifice: He'll join Danganronpa and end it for good. Even if it costs his life.

“**HEARTS**, in position!”

“Ace, ready for take off!”

“Princess, waiting for orders.”

“Queen, patrolling.”

“The Joker is commanding. Alright, D.I.C.E.! This is our most important mission in a hot minute, so don't blow it! Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” The four voices call back synchronically over their respective walkie-talkies. *Finally*. They've infiltrated the Remnants of Despair just in time to prevent another killing game. It has happened *fifty-two* times—or seasons, whatever they call it! Not anymore. They can put an end to this tragedy *now*.

Megumi smiles, rare for her; contrary to what those in passing may believe, she doesn't lack a sense of humor nor does she possess a penchant for irritation. When Mayumi would pester her relentlessly or when Kokichi would toss a snide remark at Youta, she would feel something she imagines resembles amusement—or, if not, the potential replication of such. Megumi just likes to keep to herself, that's all.

Now it's time for D.I.C.E. to fight against tyranny. She can smile now.

“Princess, on the move.”

Megumi sinks low to the ground outside a tall building. Reo had been through here recently to pry off a vent. Megumi doesn't care for missions where she has to crawl through dust and mold, but it's a job only she can do! Whenever it is time for her—for Princess—to shine, she feels that rare grin pull against her lips—even in such morbid circumstances as finding out the potential candidates of a killing game.

“Ace checkin' in! Princess, the common rooms surrounding the north and east vents are clear! They're already conversing in the meeting room. Passed by Bubbles on the south side. He's gettin' them coffee. It's leisure talk for now, but be quick!”

Megumi nods despite Daichi not seeing her. “Right. Entering the building.”

“Queen speaking. Hacked the surveillance cameras. Building's clear for the most part in the north and east, but tread lightly in the west! Weird congregation happening in that area.”

Avoid the west, stick to the north and east. “Got it.” This vent is on the eastern side of the building and the meeting that's happening—according to Youta—is taking place in the south. “Keep an eye on the southside for me, Queen.”

“No problem.”

“Hearts still acting as decoy?”

“Of course. You're at no risk of exposure.”

“Understood.” Megumi tentatively crawls into the vent. The metal bolts creak slightly under her weight; if anyone hears her, they might believe her to be maybe a heavy rodent or perhaps a raccoon. *The perks of being underweight.*

Once, the Remnants had actually believed they had an infestation after a particularly difficult mission. Megumi had slipped and pounded against the metal when retreating after Daichi had informed her that the building was too packed for a safe infiltration. This had been resolved easily enough after D.I.C.E. had actually put rats in the vents, but the sharp tang of newly placed rodent repellent now stings her nostrils.

The trip to the meeting room is easy enough. Just as Daichi said, the north and east are clear. The true difficulty arises as Megumi hangs just above the meeting room. Right outside the door are two men with sunglasses on *(seriously, who wears sunglasses indoors?)*, decorated in finely-pressed suits as though they are there on a business trip. As Megumi creeps above them, their conversation comes to a sudden pause and their invisible glares shoot towards the vent.

Megumi pauses and holds her breath. For a minute or two, the men whisper to each other and wave their hands. It's only the words “must be the rats again” that spur her onwards and past her paranoia.

“Queen, I'm in. Turn up the bugs.”

Mayumi gives no response; her words are met with action and the finely concentrated squeal of microphones being pushed to their ultimate limit. The rough voice of a brutish man rings in her eardrums. “—hard to catch.”

A woman's voice—clear, high-pitched, and authoritative—speaks next. “They may be good at hiding, but we're better at catching them. This show has been going on for fifty-two seasons. They may be good at their '*jobs*', but we're better at ours.”

“That is true, but there could be consequences—!”

“Ha! Consequences from *who*? D.I.C.E.? Must I *spell it out* for you, Akio? They *betrayed* him! Kokichi Ouma is fair game now!”

Megumi stifles her gasp, holding her palm to her mouth as her brow begins to sweat. *No*.

“That's true, but they may still hold some affection for him. They only just joined the Remnants a few months ago. It might be best to postpone this selection for a while.”

“Postpone? Kokichi joined the Future Foundation! Now is the time we *need* to kill him!”

“I'm just not sure—!”

“Ren, sweetheart.” The woman turns to a frail man in the corner. “Bring in Youta, would you dear? Thank you!”

The slim man nods and retreats.

“Surely you're not thinking about…”

A moment later, Ren drags Megumi's blood-brother with him into the meeting full of Remnants. Youta isn't particularly skilled in the art of acting, but then again Himari isn't either and she has always served as their decoy. Perhaps it is because she knows Youta like the back of her own hand that she spots his irresolute demeanor and the way his fist shyly rap against his jeans. Youta is kind, quiet, and oddly forgettable: That's just how he likes it. The Remnants would never suspect *he* is capable of betraying them. Megumi imagines, or she senses, that Youta may be wondering right now: *“how did they figure me out? I did everything right. I did just what Kokichi told me to.”*

Instead, the Remnants smile warmly at his presence. “Youta, darling. Would you have a seat?” The woman flicks her wrist at the man, Akio, that she had been arguing with just moments prior. She flashes a cruel grin then—the type of grin that doesn't reach the eyes—and at once Akio shoots from his seat and manhandles Youta into it. “Youta… let me ask you, do you feel any particular way about Kokichi Ouma?”

“Um…” Youta glances at Akio and then that woman whose smile still doesn't reach her eyes. “...I dislike him. I betrayed him.”

“Yes, we're aware. As you know your comrades better than we do, we want you to answer for them, okay? We trust you far more. Of course, you know the consequences for lying.”

Death.

“Of course I do, Justine.” *Justine*. That's her name. “I'm fine with that.”

“Right. Then I ask you, Youta—and of course I know *you* wouldn't mind, but we're asking what *they* think. What would your friends, your friends being those formerly known as *D.I.C.E.*, think if Kokichi Ouma was selected as a contestant of Danganronpa Season 53?" She leans back and smirks. "Take your time, of course."

Youta's face pales. His face already has a naturally light hue, but now it is *gray*. Justine doesn't blink at his reaction. Megumi sees Youta's fingers tighten around his arm chair. He says then, bright and light, "They wouldn't care. Kokichi joined the Future Foundation. We're *against* the Future Foundation." *Wrong. We're a part of them too. They just don't know that.* "Why would we care about Kokichi anymore? He betrayed us long before we betrayed him."

"Very well. Then it is so." Justine gestures to another woman in the meeting taking the minutes. "Write that down. Kokichi is a go for a contestant. Now, our next candidate holds the title of Ultimate Detec—oh, yes, please show Youta out." Akio grabs Youta by his shoulders and guides him through that still opened door. Youta's head hangs low as he walks and staggers like a drunken man. "And Youta?"

"Yes, Justine?"

"Thank you for your comments. This has been a *big help*."

* * *

"Kokichi. They want you to be a part of *Danganronpa*. Do you understand what that means?"

"Obviously, Tsubasa! Do I *look* like an idiot?"

"No! That's not what I mean and you know it! You shouldn't be in here contemplating! You should be *out there*, leading us! Who cares if the Remnants find us out? Who cares? We'll beat them like we always do! Remember that time, when—!"

"I don't need any of your motivational speeches. Save that for Himari." Tsubasa scoffs but Kokichi doesn't pause. "I've already made my decision."

Tsubasa halts at that, any futile words to sway Kokichi's mind ceasing. "Yeah? What's that?"

Megumi already knows. She knew that night she was passing by Kokichi's room and she heard a muffled sob. She knew when she peeked through the crack of the door and saw a broken chair that still hadn't been repaired. She knew when she sunk down beside the door and listened with her ear pressed against the wood to whispered reassurances.

"I don't want to leave them, but… you idiot! You have to!" Kokichi smacks himself upside the head. "This is the only way to save them! What if they decide to put their own people into the killing games, huh? Last in, first out! Get over your own goddamn feelings!"

She knows what his final resolve is going to be.

"I'm going to enter Danganronpa. I'm going to end *Danganronpa."*

Kokichi says the exact same sentence to Tsubasa. Megumi figures she shouldn't be listening—this is a *private* affair between the captain and his first-mate. She's the *sleuth*, though: She's known for being in places she isn't supposed to be and knowing things she isn't supposed to know. When he repeats that sentence, she thinks maybe that she might finally feel the sadness she yearns for. She needs to hear it again, maybe; maybe she needs it a third time, or a fourth… any amount of times to stop the resignation.

"You're going to… what?"

"They only erase memories. They can't rewrite our entire personality. Any version of me has all of you to think about. I know that any version of me will end Danganronpa."

"What if you…"

"Die? Yeah, that's a possibility. So what? You're second-in-command, aren't you? You'll be the one to push them through it."

"Yeah, but… we don't want to lose you. You're the boss! You're Joker! It won't be the same without you."

"Yup. Of course it won't. But… it looks like it'll finally be Spades' turn to shine! Isn't that exciting?" Kokichi lightly punches Tsubasa's shoulder. "C'mon! Cheer up already! You make the weirdest faces when you're upset."

Tsubasa shakes his head and sighs. "Ha… yeah, you're right. Well, I support you! I know our leader won't let us down! And if you do, we're going to be really pissed off at you, alright?"

Kokichi chuckles. "Well, *obviously* I won't fail! Duh-doy! What do you think I am, chopped liver?"

The two laugh and joke yet Megumi still feels that emptiness. It isn't okay to joke like that… not yet. Maybe Tsubasa is feeling it too. Maybe he feels like he *has* to joke.

When Kokichi ducks out of the room and Megumi hides behind a bookcase, she sees Tsubasa's shoulders droop and his posture slacken. Always upright, always respectful, always *deceptively happy* Tsubasa... When she hears those muffled sobs, she knows it's time to retreat. He wouldn't be happy if he knew that she was listening in on him.

Later that day, Kokichi is still smiling. *Deceptively smiling Kokichi.*

* * *

While Kokichi is not withdrawn in any sense of the word, he always has had a tendency to avoid sentimentality. That habit is erased around his family usually, but compared to the likes of Daichi or Ryuu, he is distant. That isn't a high bar to set: Daichi grabs her in a hug every time she dare step out of her room and even though Ryuu would scoff at the notion of caring, he always holds on to her wrist or hand while they are walking side by side as if afraid of losing her in the crowd.

Kokichi, while not withdrawn, is not known to be of the affectionate variety. In Megumi's observations, he shows his tenderness in subtle ways. Like Mayumi would do when she jabbed too hard at one of their insecurities, he lets his actions speak louder than words. While he doesn't bake 'too many cookies', as Mayumi would *claim* to happen directly after she hurt someone's feelings, he would sometimes grant one of them a position during a heist they had really been striving for or perhaps pat them tenderly on the head after a successful mission. When it was a close call, he would squeeze their hand as if to say: *"I'm glad you're safe."* Never words, always actions.

After Kokichi's decision and declaration to Tsubasa, he morphed into someone privy to both love languages. When Reo successfully created a new 'potion'—as he called it—and practiced his evil cackle (*resemblant of a mad scientist*, he insisted), Kokichi would join him and show him how to make particularly menacing gestures or facial expressions. Sometimes they cackled together until it was time for dinner and Ryuu or Himari had to grab them.

"Daisuke, pass the potatoes! *Please*!" He tacks on that word at the end like it means something. He actually has manners suddenly. He says *'thank you', 'excuse me', 'good morning', 'good evening'*—!

"Oh, Megumi~!" Kokichi skips right up to her. His face, still child-like and almost impish in appearance, contrasts the way his eyes crinkle yet wilt under the lamp swinging dimly above them. Kokichi may be great at hiding his emotions, but she *knows* him.

She silently watches. He sways back and forth and giggles at her gloomy disposition, tilting like a cup that a cat was knocking off a dresser. Then he wraps his arms around her and squeezes her so tight that it feels her ribs might pop out of place. He rarely hugs her—or any of them. It's foreign and unconventional.

She doesn't hug him back. Her arms lay limply at her side as she bores down at his plum little head digging into her sternum. Disconnected: she's completely disconnected from that heart beating in her chest yet she understands those shallow and quick breaths Kokichi takes. This is hard for him, too.

Kokichi pulls back and sticks his tongue out at her, pulling down on his lower lid with his tiny finger. "Wow. That had to be the *worst* hug I've ever experienced. Congratulations!" Megumi stares. "Nehehe! Just kiddin'!" He clicks his tongue and turns on his heel, wiggling his fingers as he skips over to Reo instead.

Somehow she finds her way to a bench and sinks onto it, breathing slowly like that will change anything about how she feels.

"Everything is going to change now…" she whispers. Megumi stares across their communal area at Kokichi and Reo. Kokichi is teaching him breathing exercises or something of that sort; sometimes he will inhale sharply and then release his breath to form a malicious cackle. Reo grins and follows suit, divulging another malicious—yet less intimidating—chortle.

Over the past few days since she had discovered Kokichi's plan, Megumi hasn't seen Tsubasa. He's been locked in his room—come down with a '*cold*', he claimed. Tsubasa rarely, if ever, gets sick. He's lying, but the others bought it. Tsubasa never lied except concerning the matters of his own heart… *not until now.*

"Megumi!" Mayumi, a sway to her hips and Himari holding tightly onto her hand, capers over to where Megumi is sitting. "What's up with you? You're even more moody than usual."

"I don't know. It doesn't matter."

"Well, obviously it *does* matter. What? Did you find a boy you like or something?"

"Or a girl!" Himari holds up their joined hands for emphasis.

"Or a girl. You know we can't be dating any of our enemies. It better not be one of those Remnants."

Megumi flushes and turns her head away from the couple. "No! It's not like that…"

"Hm? Then what is it? We're going to pry the truth out of you, even if it—!"

"Mayumi, Himari… all due respect, screw off." Daisuke strolls up next to her, just as Himari and Mayumi had done. His eyes don't look at the couple he's addressing; they stick to her... only to her.

Mayumi tuts and turns to Himari, pointing her thumb to Daisuke over her shoulder. "Can you believe this shit?" She frowns at Himari's grin. "What? What are you smiling for? I can't believe it!"

Himari locks elbows with her and pats her head as she takes her away. "There, there…"

"You're on *his* side? What happened to loyalty, Himari? This is outrageous!"

The duo's voices fade into white noise as they walk away and join Ryuu, who's doing lord knows what with an illusionary guitar. Daisuke sits on the bench next to her, his large stature causing the wood to creak as the structure dips slightly before rectifying itself.

They're silent as they both peer at their friends, dancing to imaginary instruments and cackling like nothing is wrong. Daisuke isn't known to be the silent type. Usually he would be right with Ryuu, playing nonexistent drums, or he would be betting—and losing—at pool. He does often sit down to partake in conversation, yes, but it's always in jest or light-hearted—a distraction. He has always been good at distractions.

Funny and lovable if a bit dull. That's Daisuke. Daisuke isn't meant to have that serious look on his face. Something is troubling him.

"Daisuke? Is something wrong?"

He turns to her fast and quick. It startles her and she leaps back in her seat, a small yelp escaping her mouth. Daisuke's face hasn't changed; where she expects a goofy and large grin is instead a small frown. He peers at her face and squints, biting his lip as if in contemplation… *Does Daisuke even think?*

He whispers, low and quiet so the others won't hear them, "Why are you always asking us that, Megumi?"

"Hm? What? What do you mean?"

"You're always asking us that question, but you never seem to ask yourself that. Do you?"

No matter what she had been expecting to hear, she doesn't expect those words to pass from his lips. Daisuke isn't meant to pick up on things like that. That's *her* job. *She* is observant. *She* is stealthy. *She* knows things others don't. *Not Daisuke.*

Megumi turns away from him, sighing. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Daisuke chuckles. His laugh, normally reassuring and boisterous, is instead boiling with withheld emotion of a variety that *Megumi* can not detect. She shivers and scoots away from him. "This is going to be a hard time for everyone soon… By everyone, I do mean *everyone*." He leans over and pokes her shoulder. That dopey grin she is so used to rises on his face. "I know you're content to just watch us and think that you know us better than we know ourselves, but we understand you too. *Especially* Tsubasa and I. We were the first ones, remember?"

Of course she does. Back when they were still in diapers, Kokichi had found and adopted them. The four of them had been inseparable… When the other members came, their entire little family became an extension of that bond.

Daisuke continues, "We understand, Megumi. You need to try and understand yourself, too."

* * *

The day that Kokichi finally tells them he has no plans to run from Danganronpa is chaos.

Cursing. A *lot* of cursing, courtesy of Mayumi. There is a lot of yelling too… and crying.

Daisuke breaks down and begs Kokichi to stay. Weird—she thought he knew, but maybe that was her own assumption. Kokichi shakes his head and explains, but nobody is hearing it.

Things become a lot more awkward after that. Tsubasa finally comes out of his room to try and lead them—just as Kokichi had requested—but when news breaks that he had known all this time… well, a select few people don't take that lightly. After that, everyone stays in their rooms. Sometimes, late at night as she lays in bed and ponders what will become of Kokichi in Danganronpa, she hears crying coming from Mayumi's room. Mayumi, usually so upright and snarky, is breaking down over this.

Megumi… She is still Megumi.

She doesn't know if she is simply incapable of feeling emotions or if she just refuses to. It doesn't matter, regardless—it's the others that she's worried about. Lord knows they are taking it harder than she is.

Tsubasa and Daisuke band together at a certain point to try and encourage them. Tsubasa: headstrong and clear-minded. Daisuke: empathetic and supportive. They made a good team. They might lead them to greatness after Kokichi…

She doesn't know that Kokichi will die. That's just another assumption.

Sooner than she expects, the day comes for Kokichi to leave them.

He stands before nine people he has loved and led his entire life, a backpack strapped securely to his back (*as if they would let him keep his belongings*). Dead silence... like everyone is *afraid* to talk. Megumi is. She doesn't want to break the ice and ruin the moment. *What was there to say?* Kokichi is gone. Their family is ruined.

The nine standing beside her are stoic and dry-eyed—or in the case of a few, they are *trying* to be. Mayumi and Himari sniffle in the corner as if their sobs will be unheard to the untrained ear. Megumi is trained, yes, but Daichi isn''t. She sees the way his eyes flicker to the two of them before softening and glistening with his own unshed tears.

Kokichi taps his foot impatiently and holds his arms out from side to side. "What? No hugs? No well wishes? Nada?" Megumi bites her cheek. Daichi crosses his arms. Daisuke stamps his foot and Tsubasa sinks lower to the ground. "...Right. Then I'll be going."

Kokichi turns, his purple hair flying in the breeze as he begins to walk. And walk. And walk further and *further and further and further and…*

"KOKICHI!" It hurts. It *hurts so bad!* Needles pierce into her heart, stringing and sewing and weaving and hurting and hurting *and crying and she can only imagine him dying—!* Megumi runs as fast as she can towards Kokichi. She screams his name again, loud—so loud that the Remnants can probably hear her, but she doesn't care when she is losing sight of the one person who has saved her even when no one else wanted her. "KOKICHI! PLEASE DON'T GO!" Her words are lost in the howling wind. Kokichi jumps and drops the bag he's holding as he faces her. She tumbles into his arms and wraps her own around his torso as if to say: *'I'm sorry for not hugging you back. I'm never letting go again. I'll never let you go.'*

"Megumi?" He lays his hands on her shoulders and squeezes. "Hey… it's alright. I'll be fine, alright? I'm alive still, okay?"

That doesn't ease her worries. Platitudes... that's all they are. Snotty sobs begin bursting from her lips as an unfamiliar water falls from her eyes. She's unused to these horrible feelings. She doesn't like feeling emotional, she decides—no, she rather hates it, because emotions lead to being hurt.

The rest of D.I.C.E. begin to surround the two. She feels Reo's hand on her shoulder as he closes in to join the hug and then Daichi joins soon afterwards, and then Daisuke and Tsubasa, then Youta, and everyone else slowly begins to succumb to those bottled feelings and reach inwards to the depths of their hearts. These hearts yearn for their supreme leader to stay with them and to coax their worries—to lead them when no one else could and to save them when no one else would.

He's gone now…

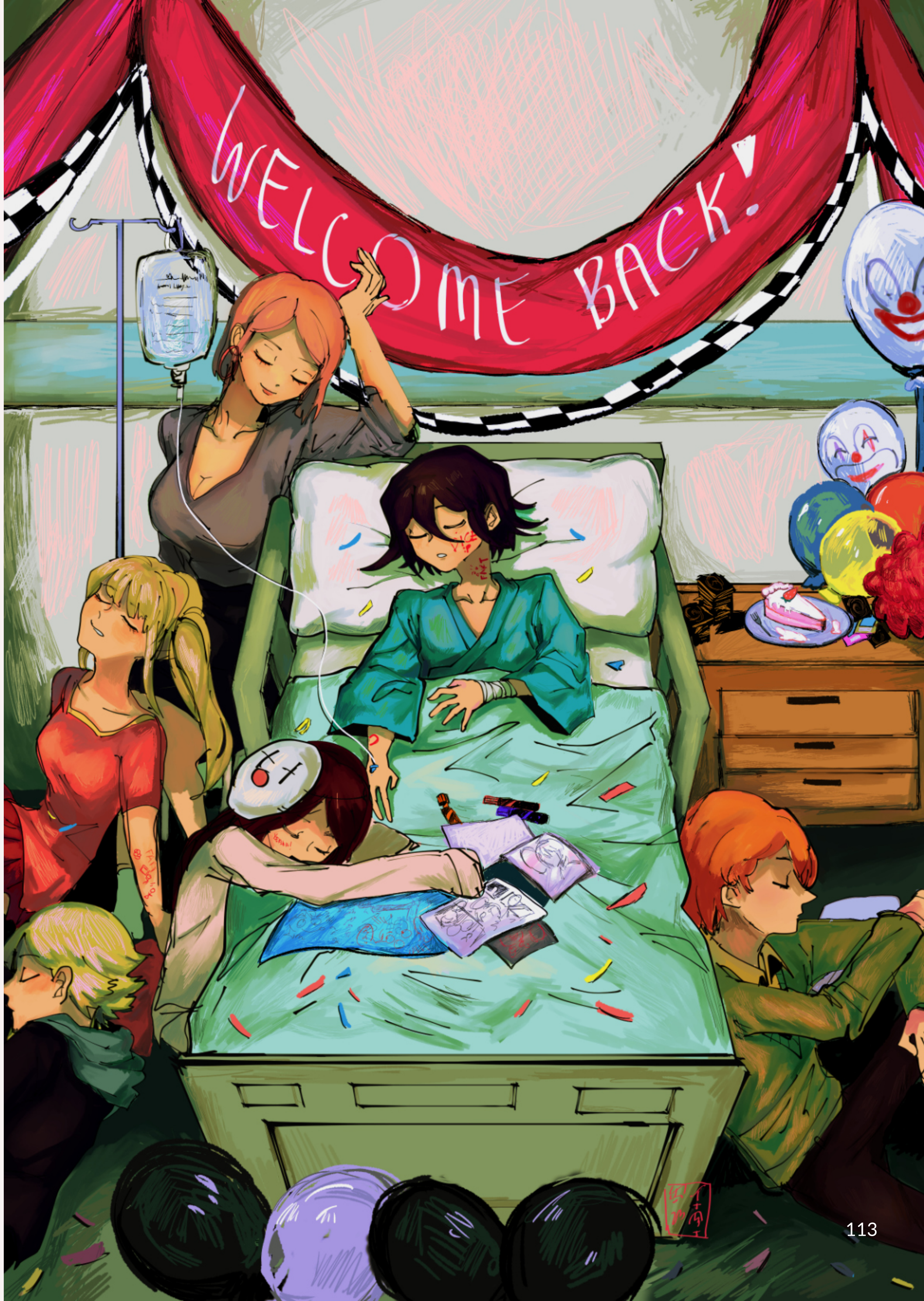
"I'll be fine, alright?"

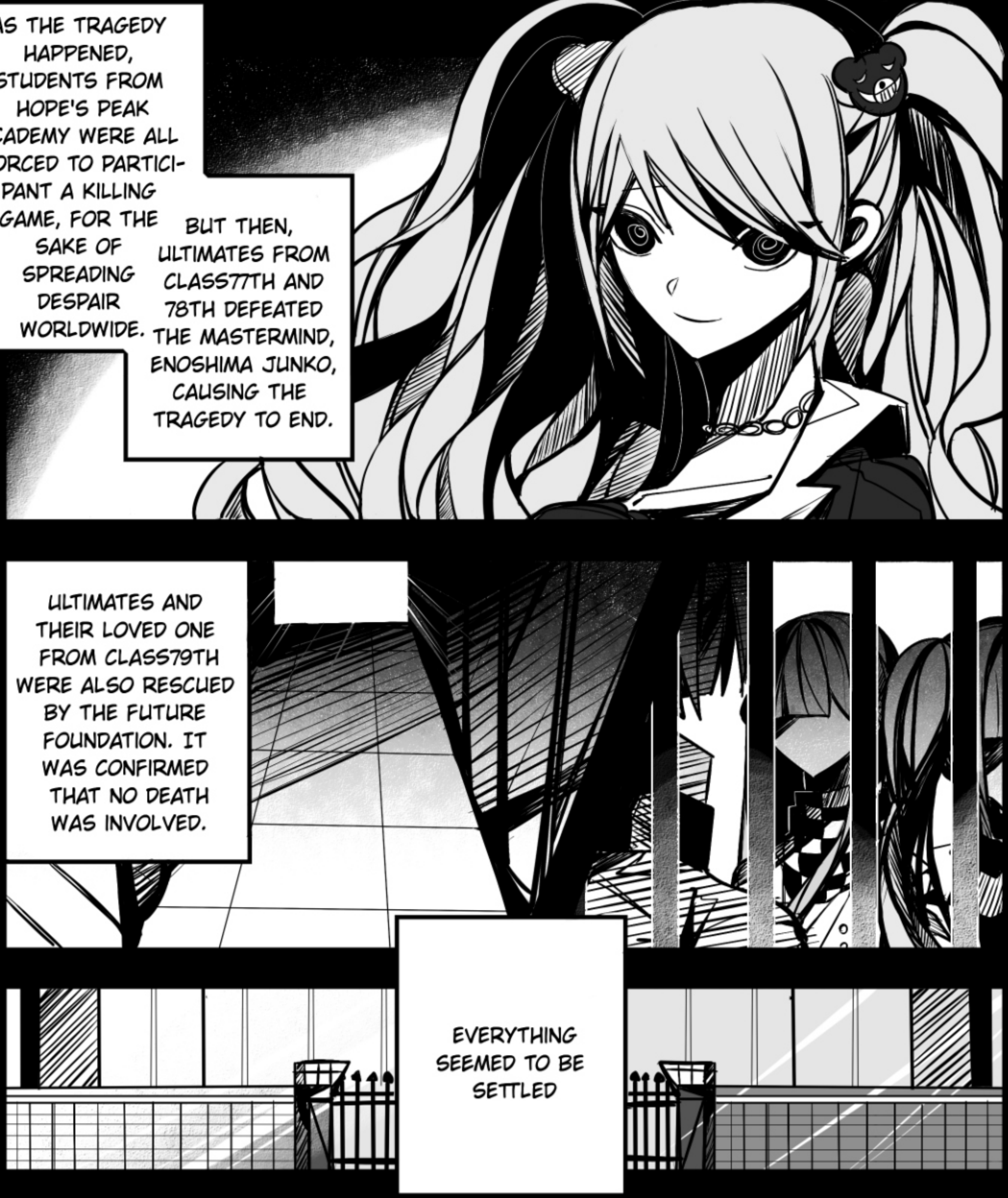
He's gone… for now.

"I'm going to end Danganronpa."

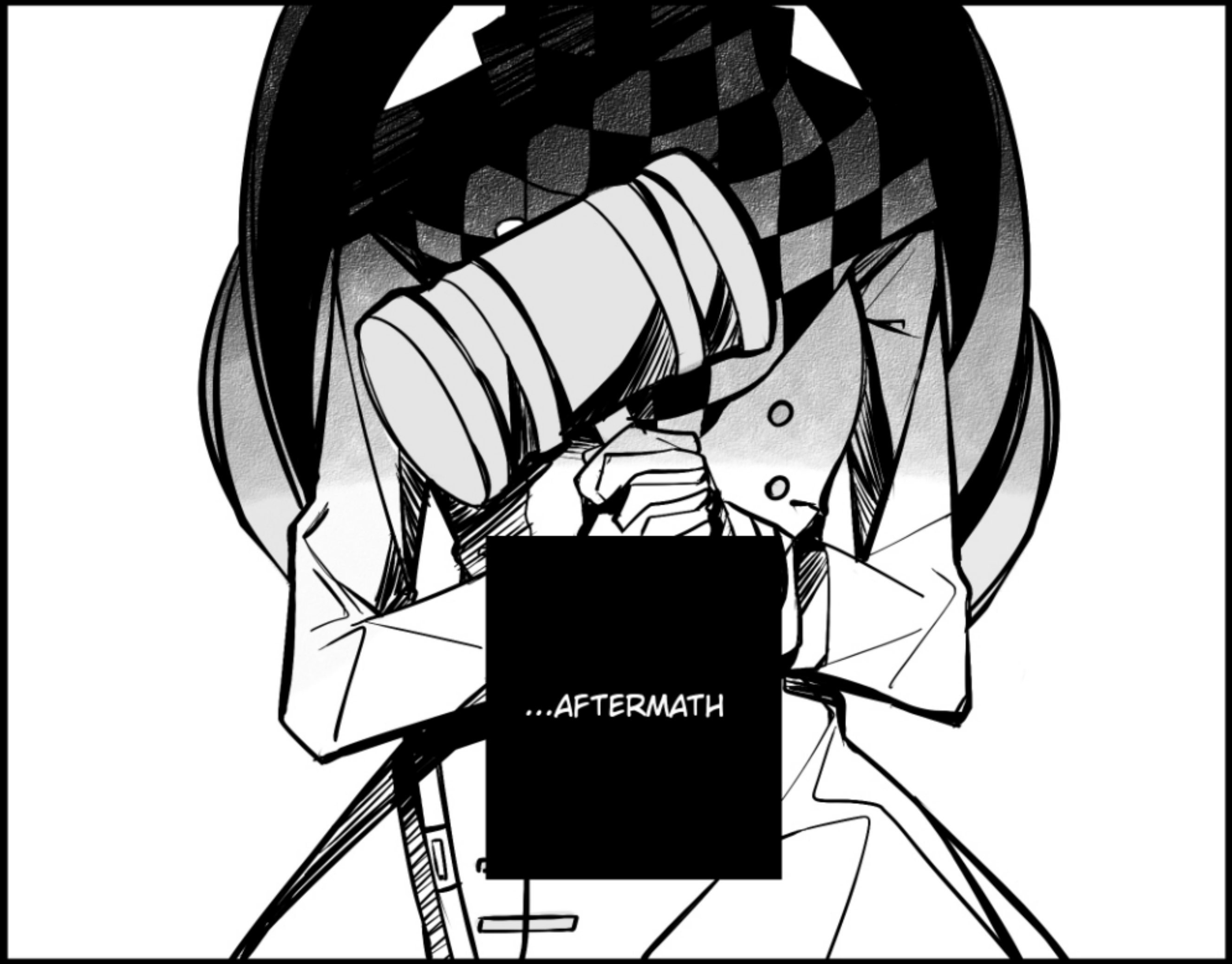
Even as his previous words echo in her head, she doesn't smile. There is still a chance he will die. However, that chance is merely a chance! He's smart and decisive… there is absolutely no way that he is going to go down without a fight.

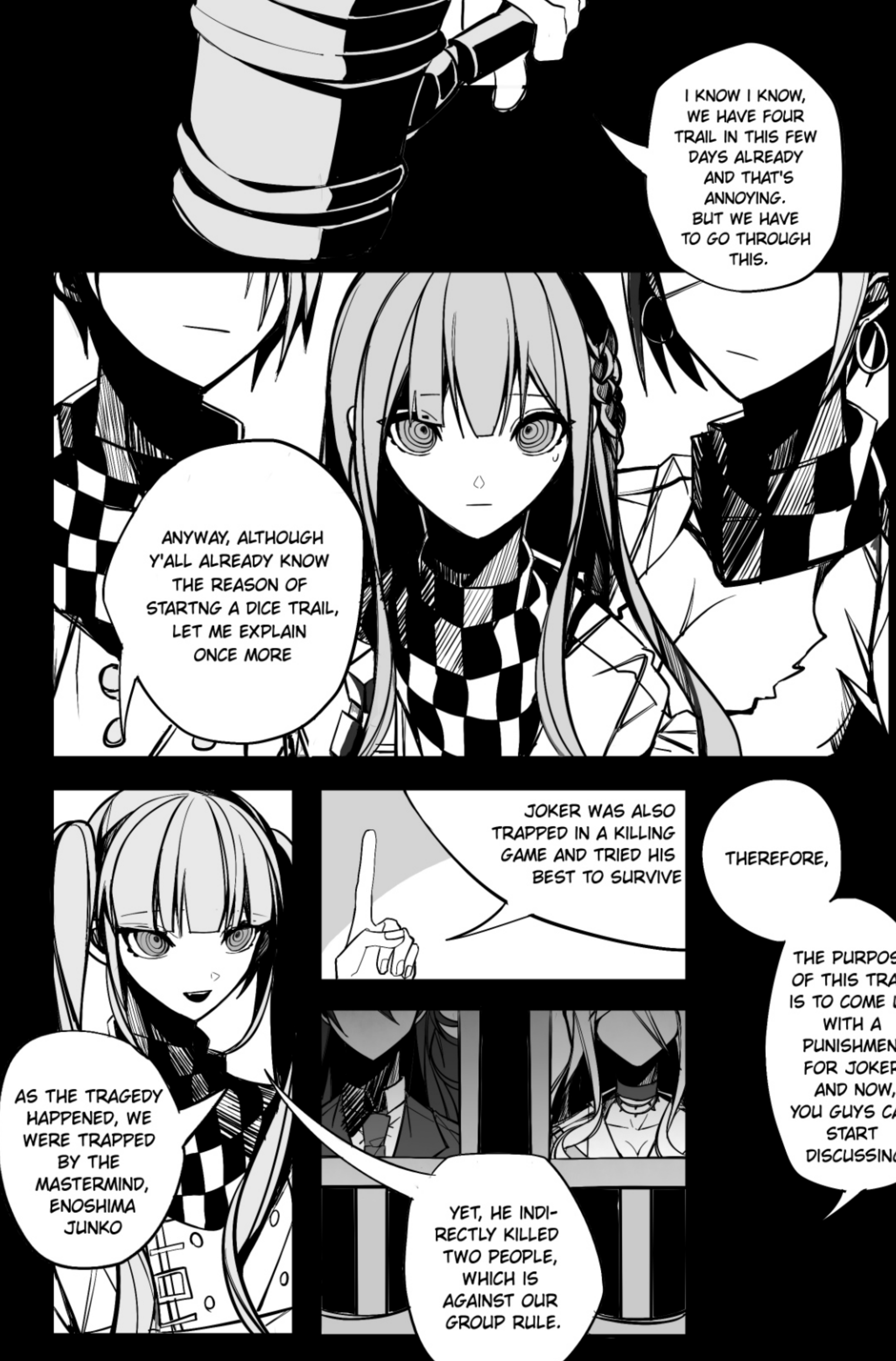
For the first time, Megumi allows her heart to feel hope.

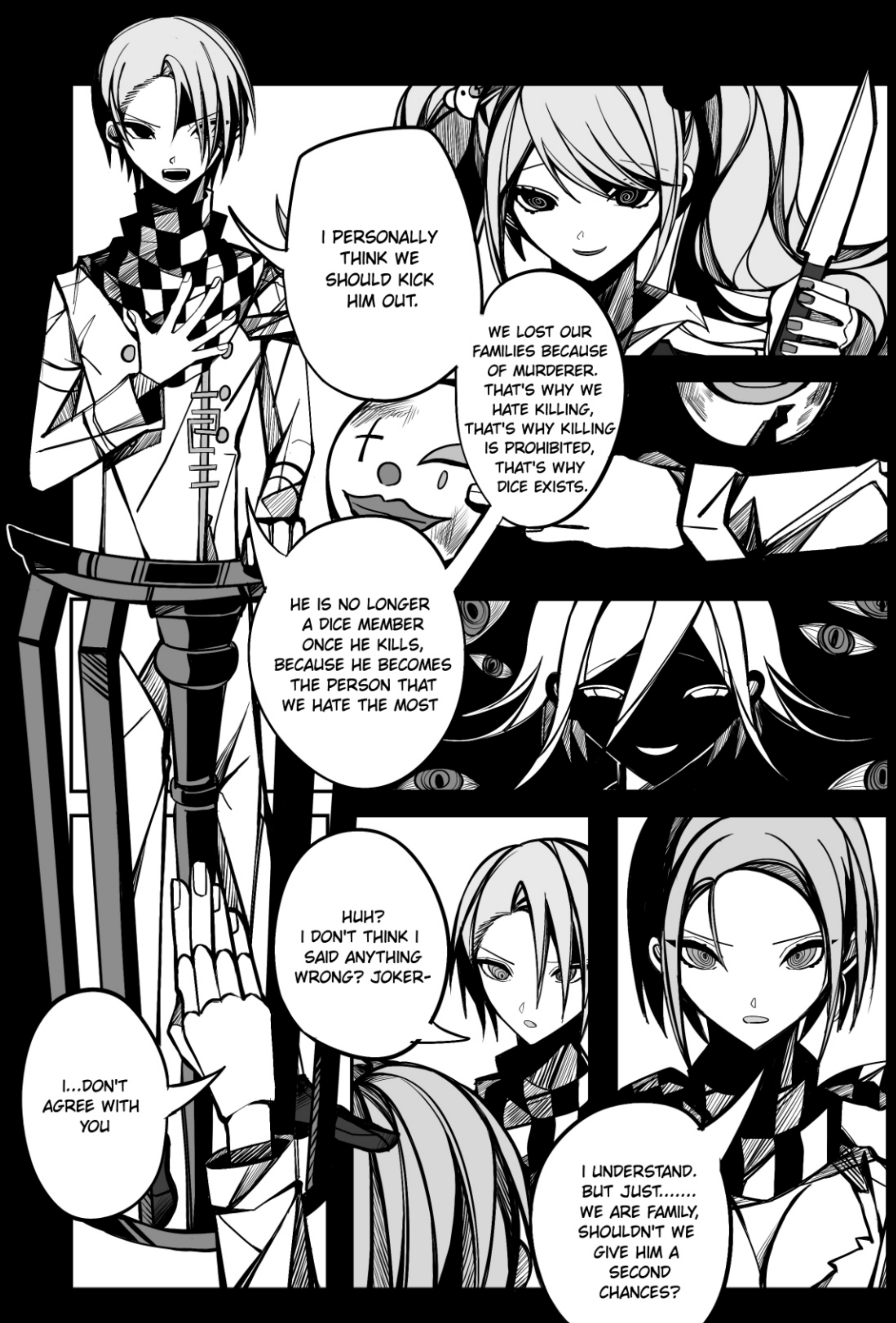

WELCOME BACK!

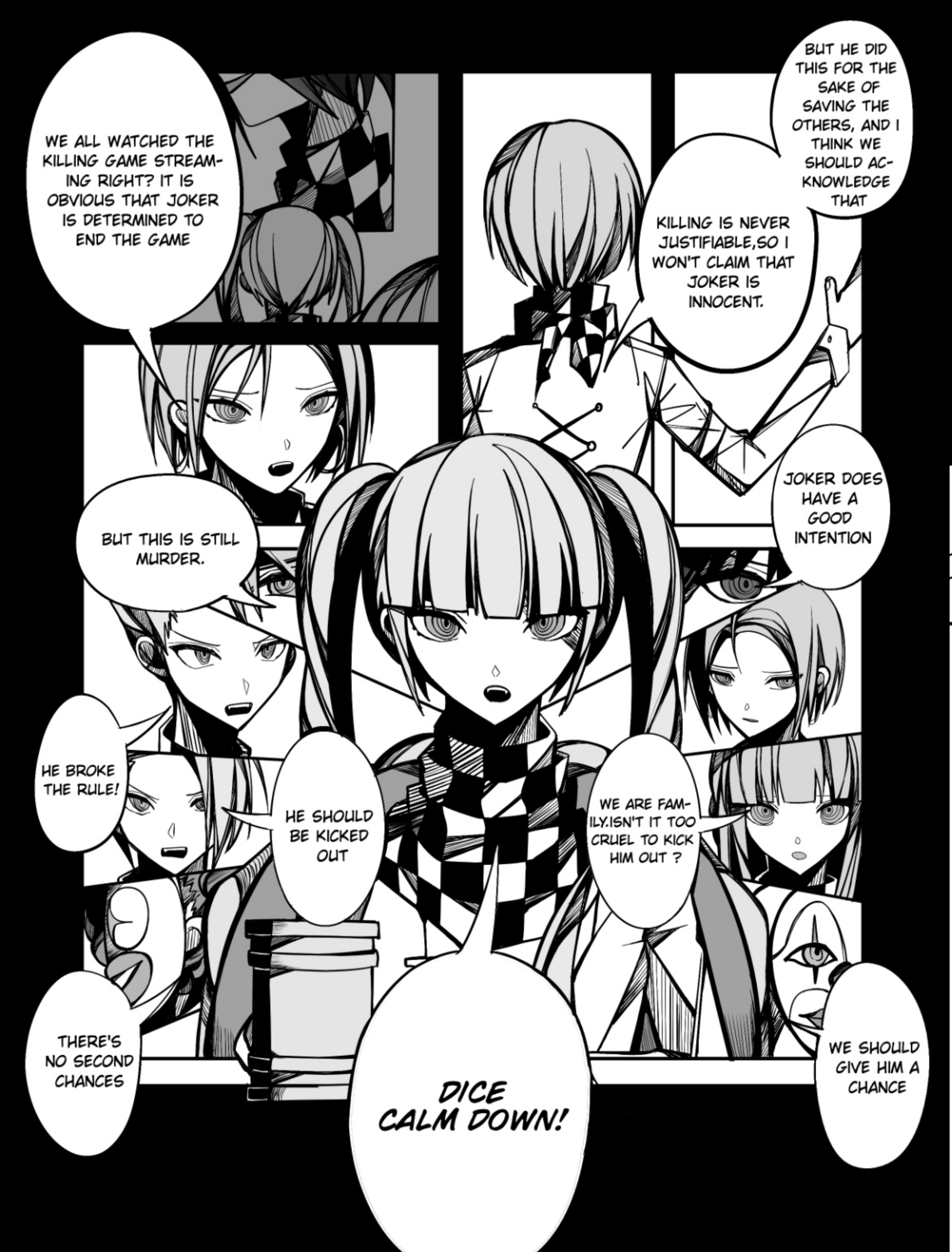

AS THE TRAGEDY HAPPENED, STUDENTS FROM HOPE'S PEAK ACADEMY WERE ALL FORCED TO PARTICIPANT A KILLING GAME, FOR THE SAKE OF SPREADING DESPAIR WORLDWIDE.
BUT THEN, ULTIMATES FROM CLASS77TH AND 78TH DEFEATED THE MASTERMIND, ENOSHIMA JUNKO, CAUSING THE TRAGEDY TO END.
ULTIMATES AND THEIR LOVED ONE FROM CLASS79TH WERE ALSO RESCUED BY THE FUTURE FOUNDATION. IT WAS CONFIRMED THAT NO DEATH WAS INVOLVED.
EVERYTHING SEEMED TO BE SETTLED

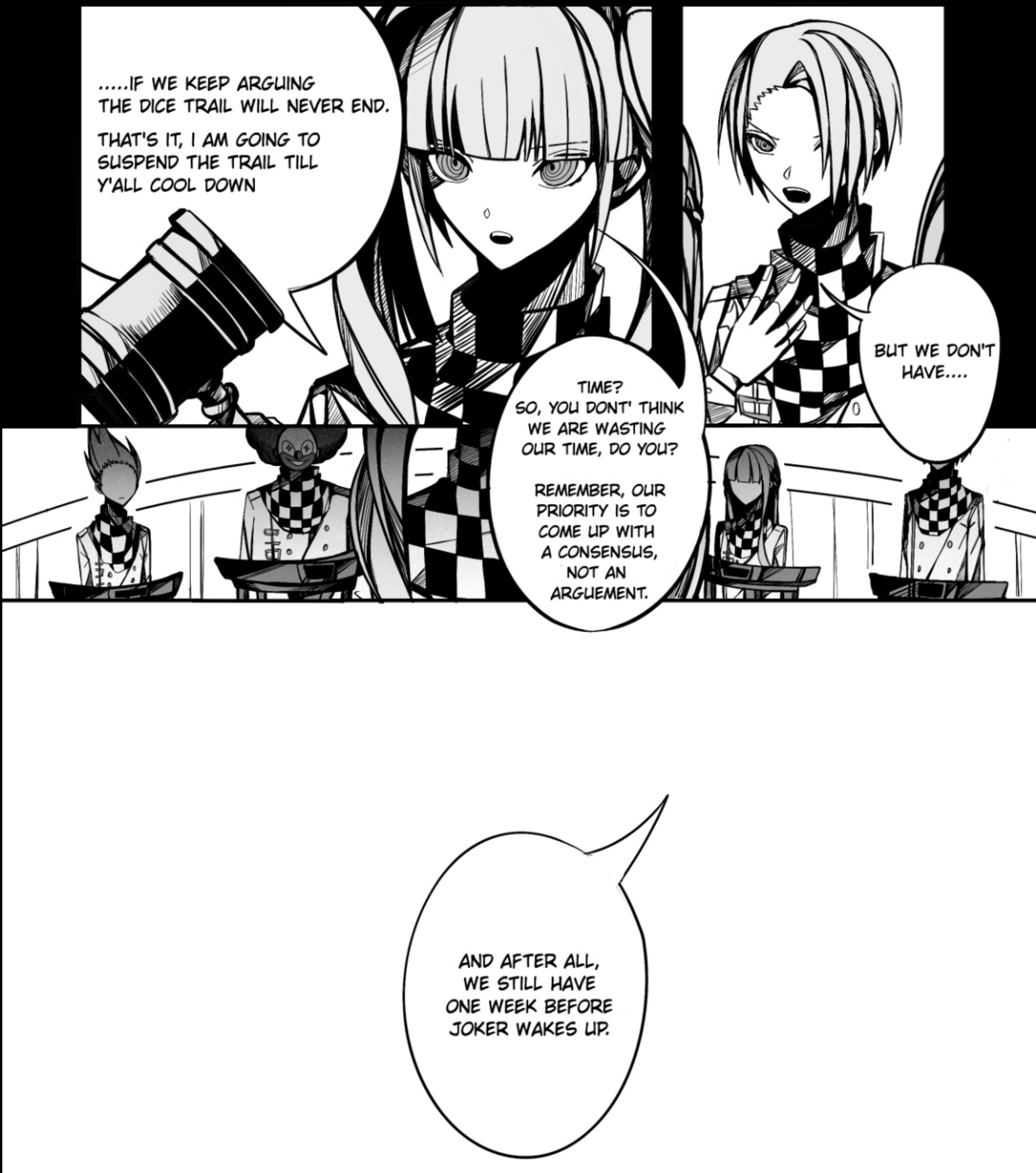
YET, THERE WERE STILL SOME....

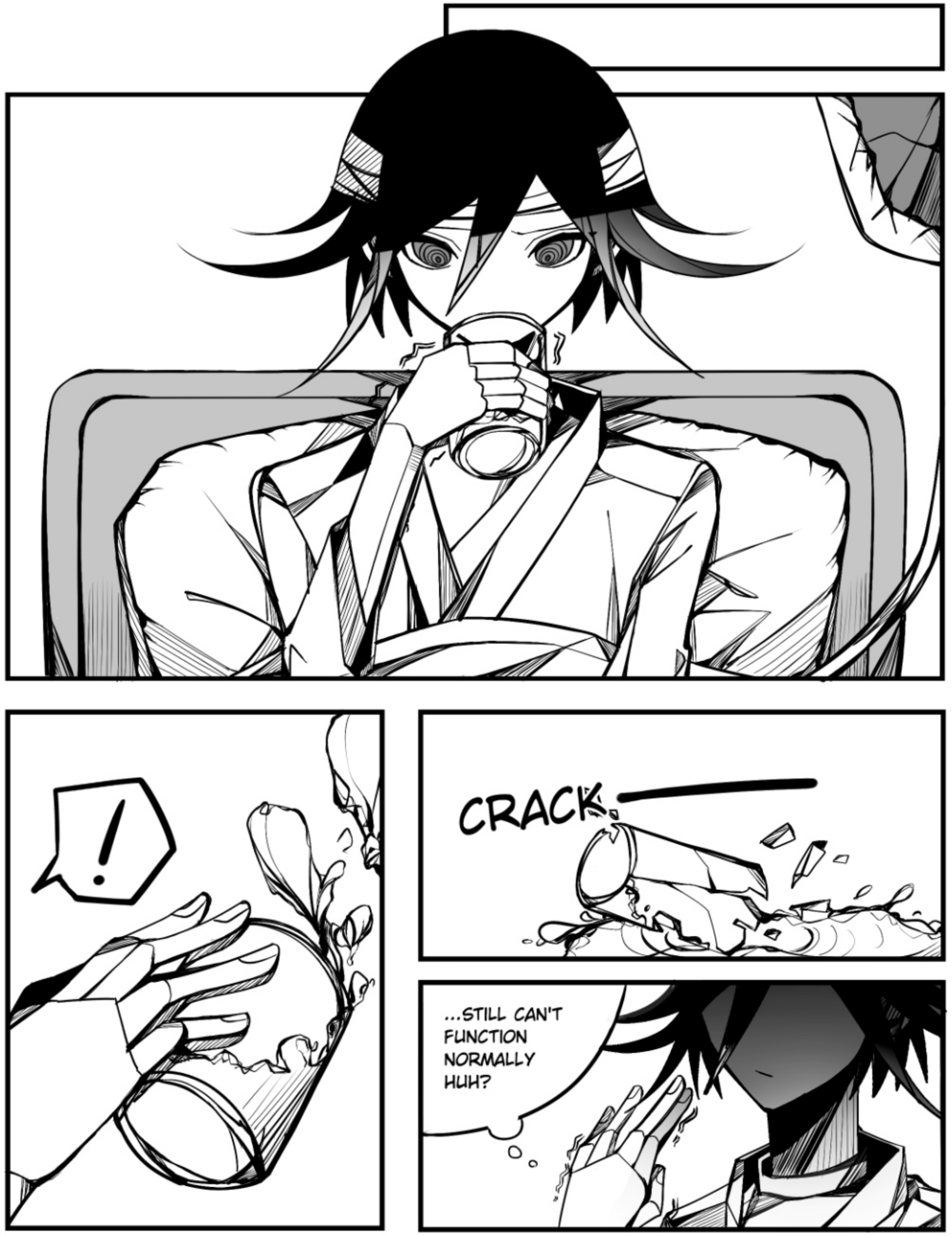


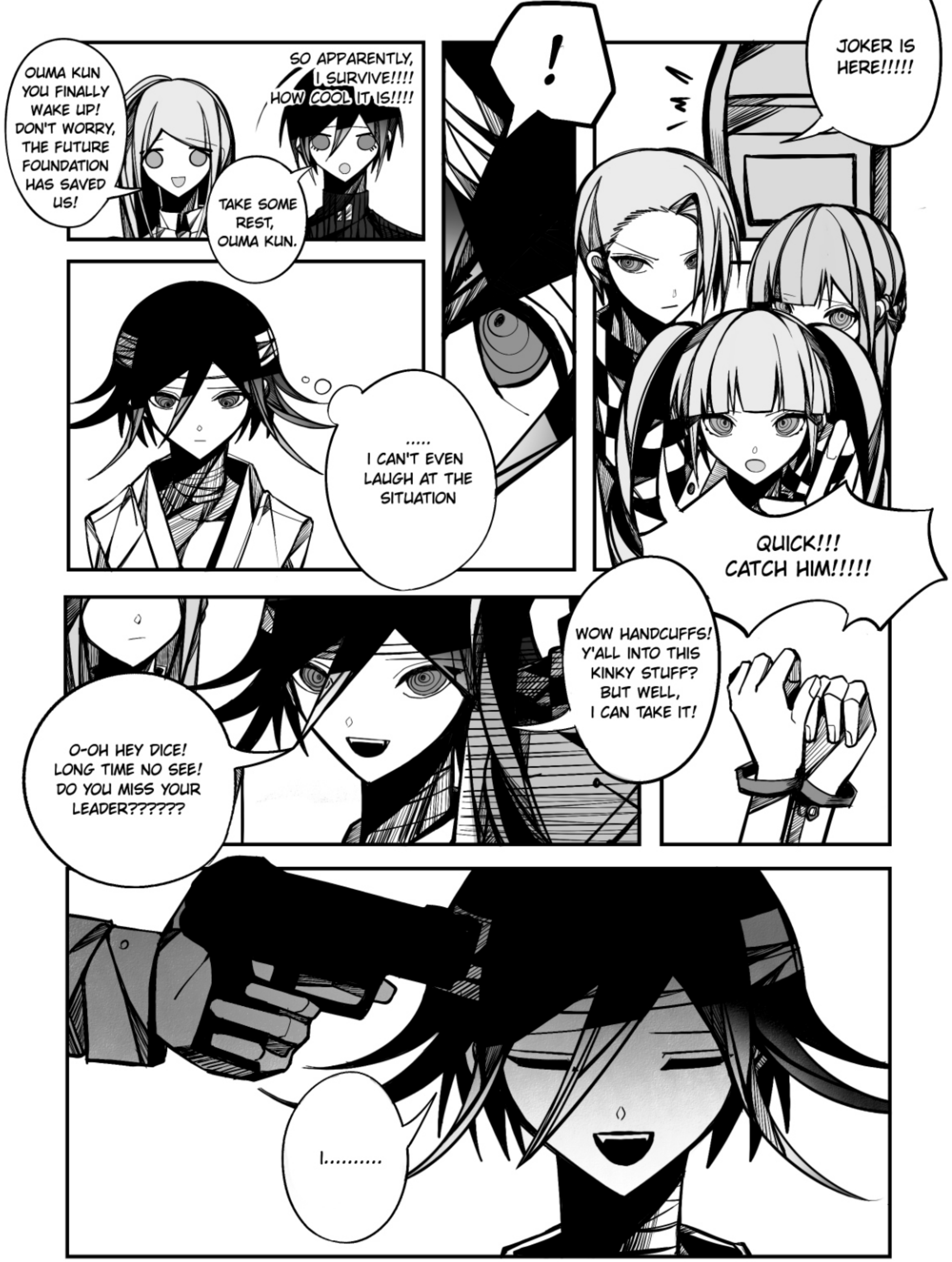

I KNOW I KNOW, WE HAVE FOUR TRAIL IN THIS FEW DAYS ALREADY AND THAT'S ANNOYING. BUT WE HAVE TO GO THROUGH THIS.
ANYWAY, ALTHOUGH Y'ALL ALREADY KNOW THE REASON OF STARTNG A DICE TRAIL, LET ME EXPLAIN ONCE MORE
AS THE TRAGEDY HAPPENED, WE WERE TRAPPED BY THE MASTERMIND, ENOSHIMA JUNKO
JOKER WAS ALSO TRAPPED IN A KILLING GAME AND TRIED HIS BEST TO SURVIVE
YET, HE INDIRECTLY KILLED TWO PEOPLE, WHICH IS AGAINST OUR GROUP RULE.
THEREFORE,
THE PURPOSE OF THIS TRAIL IS TO COME UP WITH A PUNISHMENT FOR JOKER. AND NOW, YOU GUYS CAN START DISCUSSING

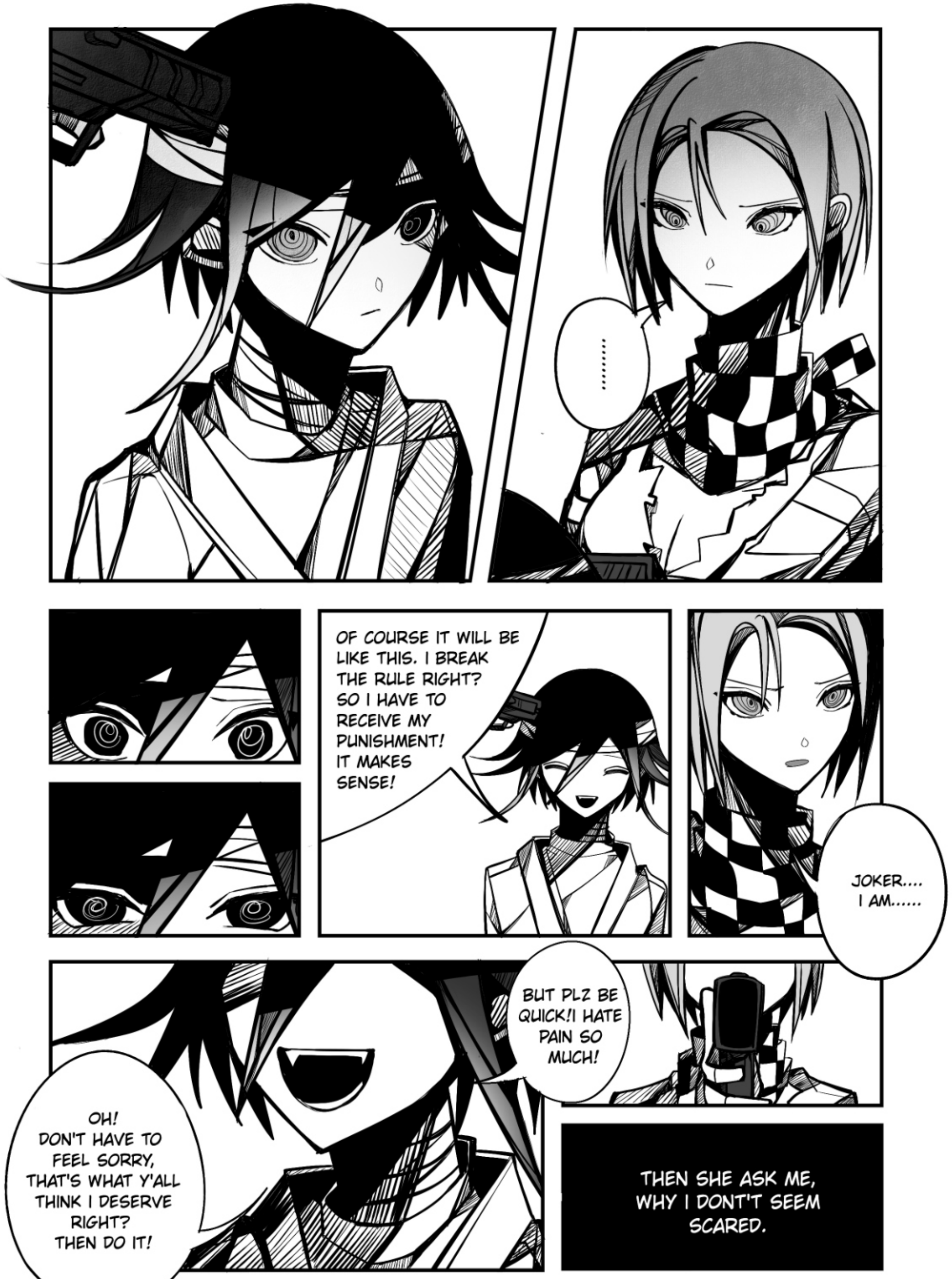

I PERSONALLY THINK WE SHOULD KICK HIM OUT.
WE LOST OUR FAMILIES BECAUSE OF MURDERER. THAT'S WHY WE HATE KILLING, THAT'S WHY KILLING IS PROHIBITED, THAT'S WHY DICE EXISTS.
HE IS NO LONGER A DICE MEMBER ONCE HE KILLS, BECAUSE HE BECOMES THE PERSON THAT WE HATE THE MOST
I...DON'T AGREE WITH YOU
HUH? I DON'T THINK I SAID ANYTHING WRONG? JOKER-
I UNDERSTAND. BUT JUST...... WE ARE FAMILY, SHOULDN'T WE GIVE HIM A SECOND CHANCES?

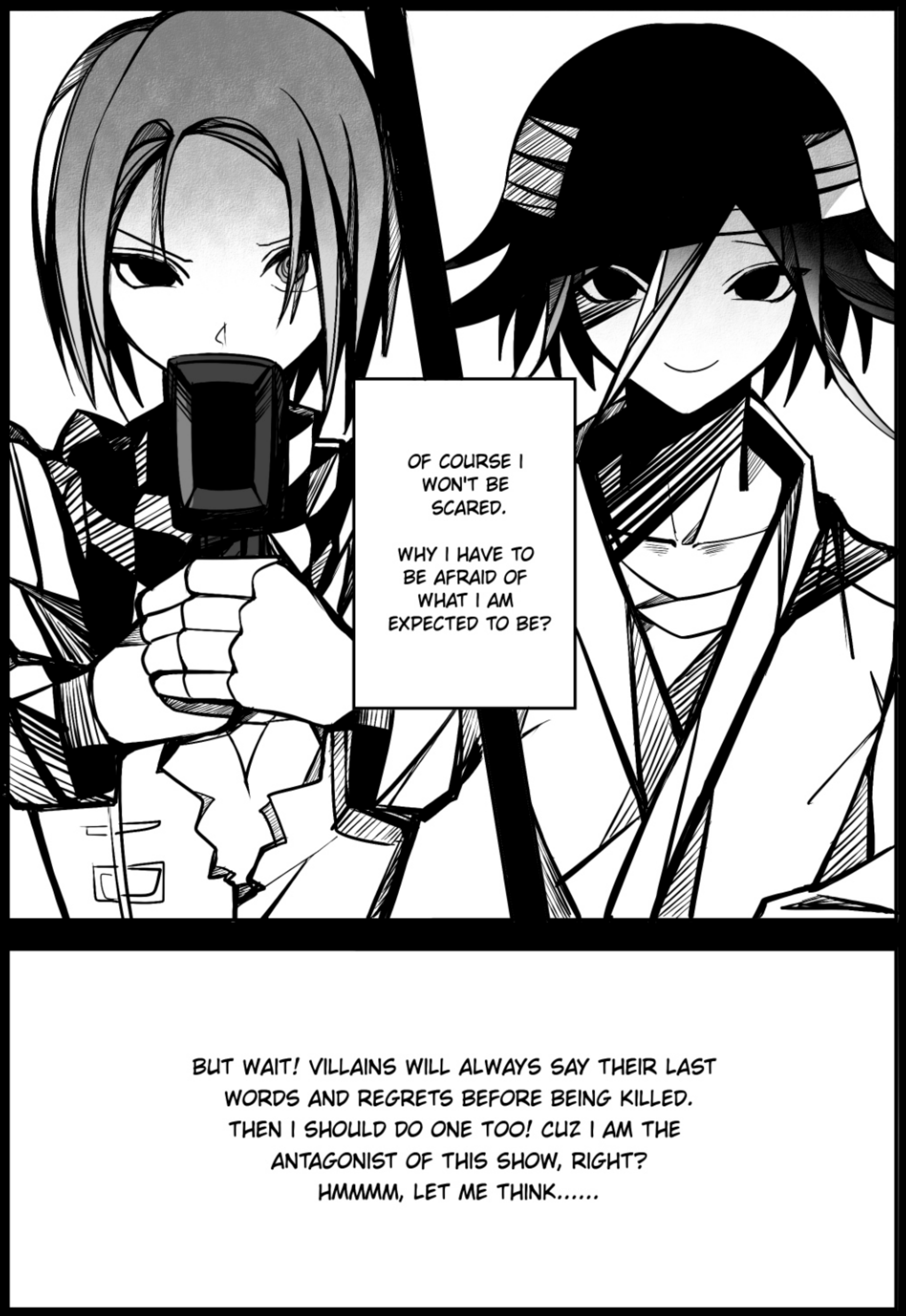

WE ALL WATCHED THE KILLING GAME STREAMING RIGHT? IT IS OBVIOUS THAT JOKER IS DETERMINED TO END THE GAME
BUT HE DID THIS FOR THE SAKE OF SAVING THE OTHERS, AND I THINK WE SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THAT
KILLING IS NEVER JUSTIFIABLE,SO I WON'T CLAIM THAT JOKER IS INNOCENT.
JOKER DOES HAVE A GOOD INTENTION
BUT THIS IS STILL MURDER.
HE BROKE THE RULE!
HE SHOULD BE KICKED OUT
WE ARE FAMILY.ISN'T IT TOO CRUEL TO KICK HIM OUT ?
THERE'S NO SECOND CHANCES
DICE CALM DOWN!
WE SHOULD GIVE HIM A CHANCE

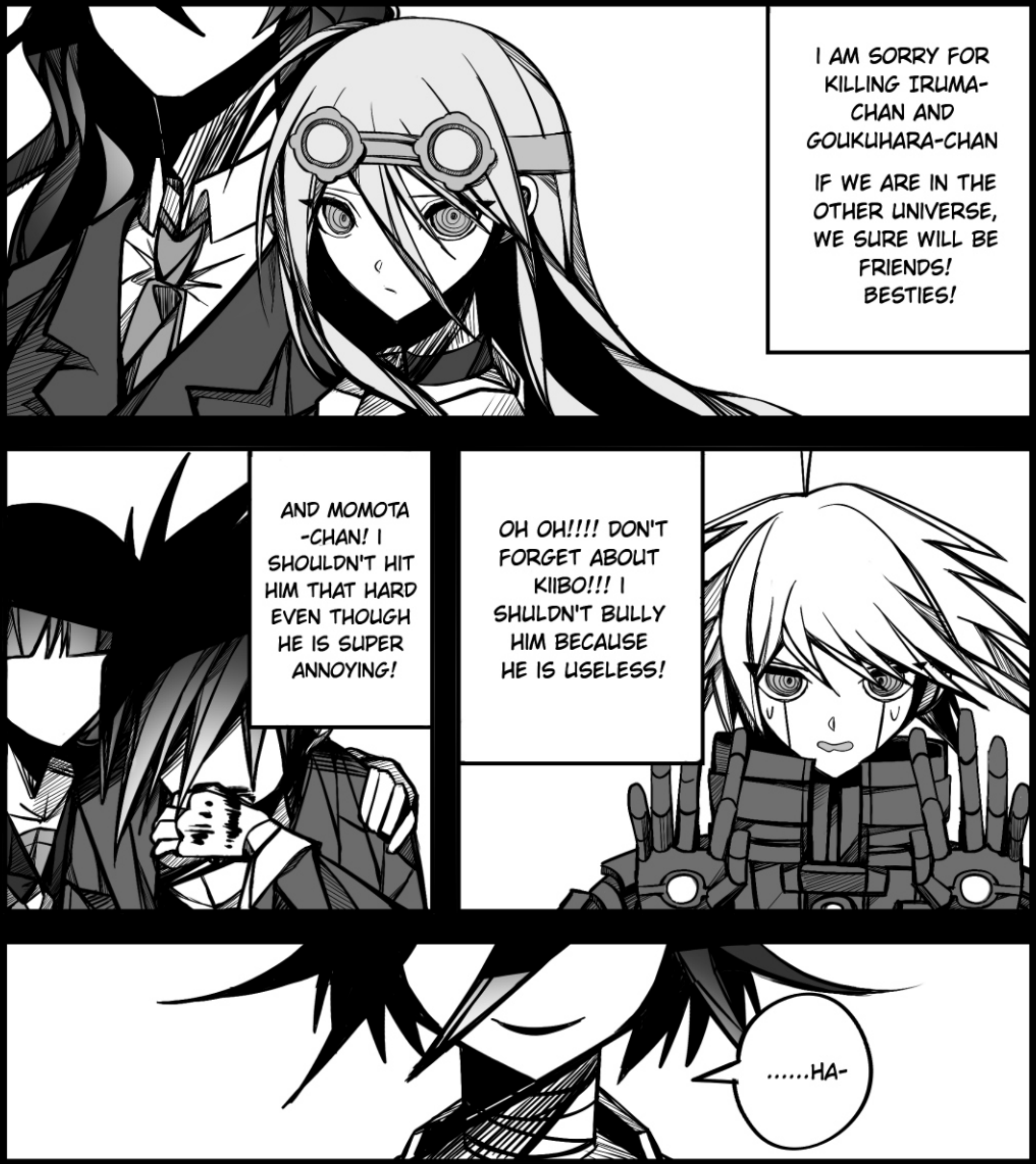

.....IF WE KEEP ARGUING THE DICE TRAIL WILL NEVER END.
THAT'S IT, I AM GOING TO SUSPEND THE TRAIL TILL Y'ALL COOL DOWN
BUT WE DON'T HAVE....
TIME? SO, YOU DONT' THINK WE ARE WASTING OUR TIME, DO YOU?
REMEMBER, OUR PRIORITY IS TO COME UP WITH A CONSENSUS, NOT AN ARGUEMENT.
AND AFTER ALL, WE STILL HAVE ONE WEEK BEFORE JOKER WAKES UP.


!
CRACK
...STILL CAN'T FUNCTION NORMALLY HUH?


OUMA KUN YOU FINALLY WAKE UP! DON'T WORRY, THE FUTURE FOUNDATION HAS SAVED US!
SO APPARENTLY, I SURVIVE!!!! HOW COOL IT IS!!!!
TAKE SOME REST, OUMA KUN.
..... I CAN'T EVEN LAUGH AT THE SITUATION
!
JOKER IS HERE!!!!!
QUICK!!! CATCH HIM!!!!!
WOW HANDCUFFS! Y'ALL INTO THIS KINKY STUFF? BUT WELL, I CAN TAKE IT!
O-OH HEY DICE! LONG TIME NO SEE! DO YOU MISS YOUR LEADER??????
I.........


……
OF COURSE IT WILL BE LIKE THIS. I BREAK THE RULE RIGHT? SO I HAVE TO RECEIVE MY PUNISHMENT! IT MAKES SENSE!
JOKER.... I AM......
OH! DON'T HAVE TO FEEL SORRY, THAT'S WHAT Y'ALL THINK I DESERVE RIGHT? THEN DO IT!
BUT PLZ BE QUICK!I HATE PAIN SO MUCH!
THEN SHE ASK ME, WHY I DONT'T SEEM SCARED.


OF COURSE I WON'T BE SCARED.
WHY I HAVE TO BE AFRAID OF WHAT I AM EXPECTED TO BE?
BUT WAIT! VILLAINS WILL ALWAYS SAY THEIR LAST WORDS AND REGRETS BEFORE BEING KILLED. THEN I SHOULD DO ONE TOO! CUZ I AM THE ANTAGONIST OF THIS SHOW, RIGHT? HMMMM, LET ME THINK......


I AM SORRY FOR KILLING IRUMA-CHAN AND GOUKUHARA-CHAN
IF WE ARE IN THE OTHER UNIVERSE, WE SURE WILL BE FRIENDS! BESTIES!
AND MOMOTA-CHAN! I SHOULDN'T HIT HIM THAT HARD EVEN THOUGH HE IS SUPER ANNOYING!
OH OH!!!! DON'T FORGET ABOUT KIIBO!!! I SHULDN'T BULLY HIM BECAUSE HE IS USELESS!
......HA-

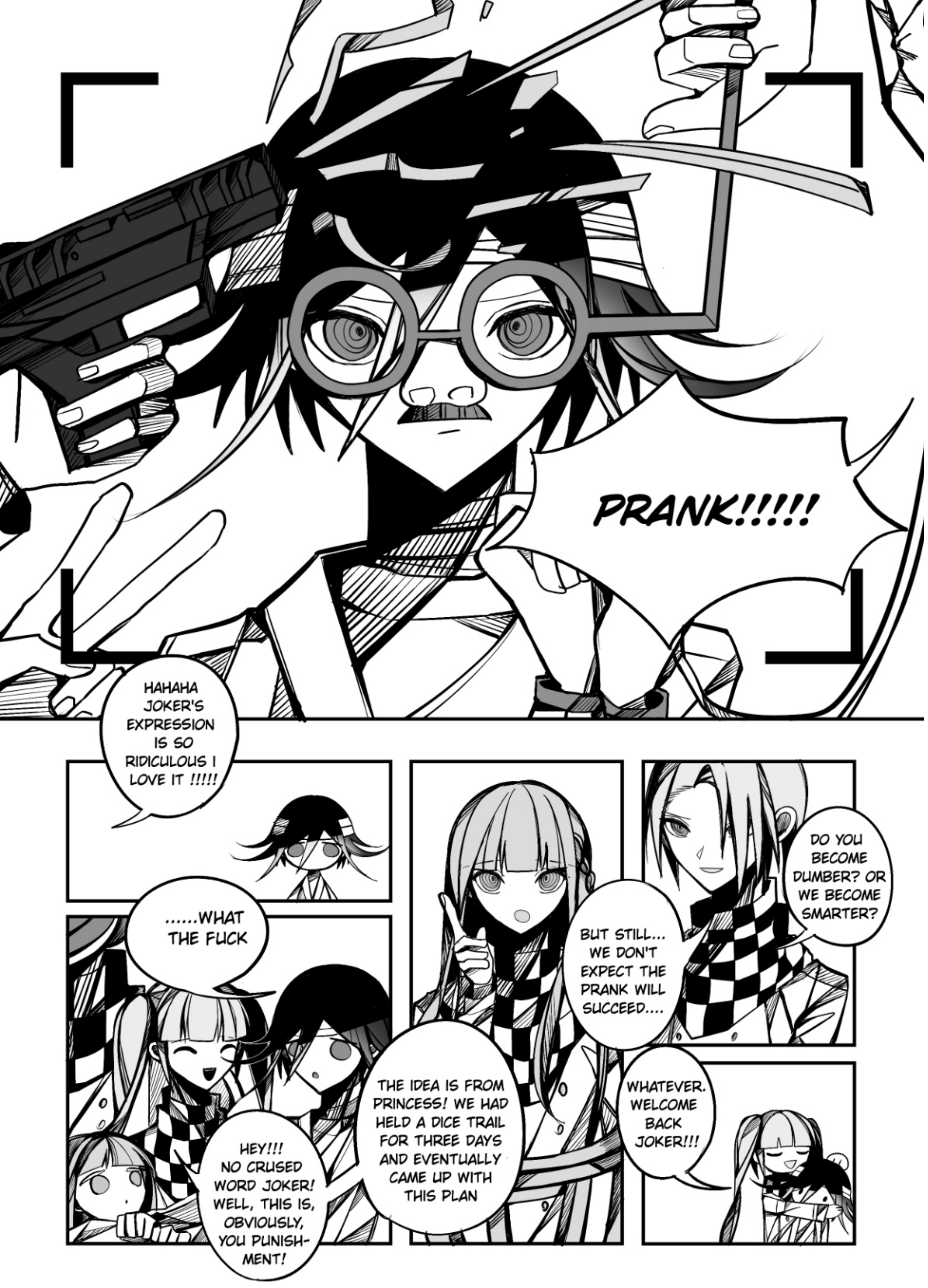
YUP YUP, THAT'S A SUPRE CILCHE MONOLOGUE! BORING!!!!!!
I AM SUPPOSED TO BE THE EVIL SUPREME LEADER AFTERALL,
OF COURSE I WON'T SAY SOMETING LIKE THAT!

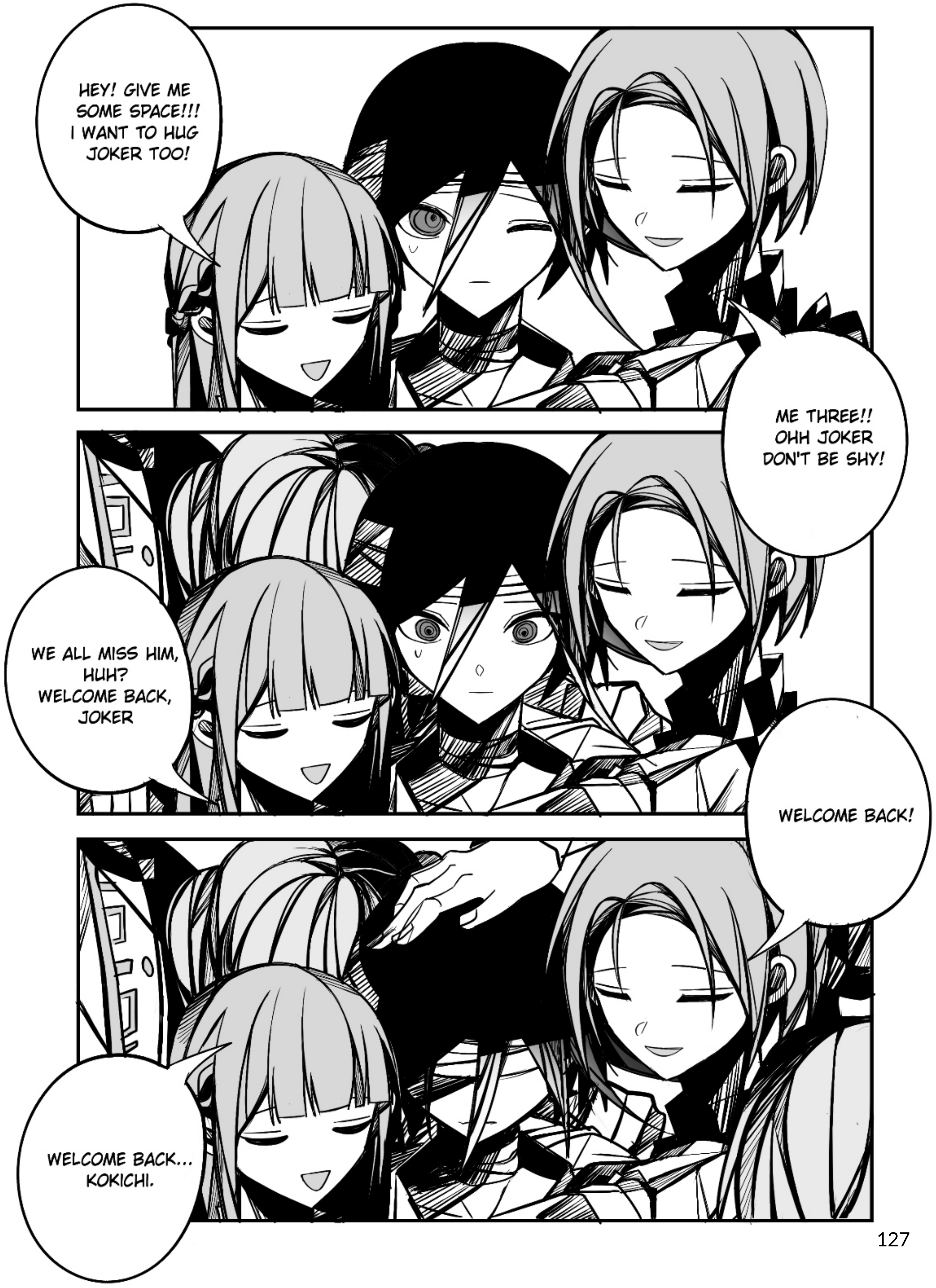
AND MY ONLY WISH....HAHA, IT DEFINITELY WON'T COME TRUE,
BECAUSE ALL I WANT......

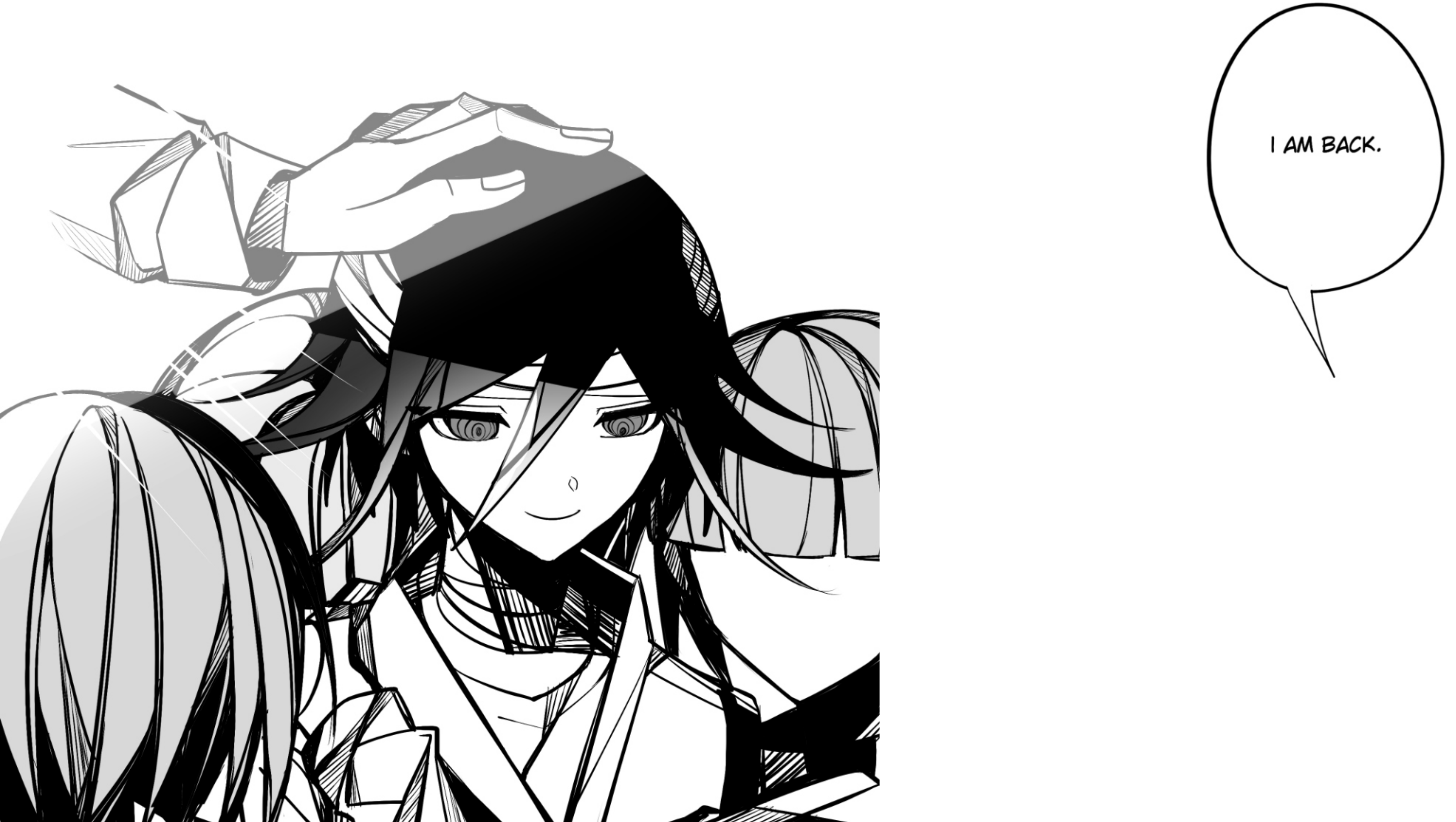
ALL I WANT TO HEAR IS DICE
SAYING

"IT IS JUST A P

BANG—


PRANK!!!!!
HAHAHA JOKER'S EXPRESSION IS SO RIDICULOUS I LOVE IT !!!!!
......WHAT THE FUCK
HEY!!! NO CRUSED WORD JOKER! WELL, THIS IS, OBVIOUSLY, YOU PUNISHMENT!
THE IDEA IS FROM PRINCESS! WE HAD HELD A DICE TRAIL FOR THREE DAYS AND EVENTUALLY CAME UP WITH THIS PLAN
BUT STILL... WE DON'T EXPECT THE PRANK WILL SUCCEED....
DO YOU BECOME DUMBER? OR WE BECOME SMARTER?
WHATEVER. WELCOME BACK JOKER!!!


HEY! GIVE ME SOME SPACE!!! I WANT TO HUG JOKER TOO!
ME THREE!! OHH JOKER DON'T BE SHY!
WE ALL MISS HIM, HUH? WELCOME BACK, JOKER
WELCOME BACK!
WELCOME BACK... KOKICHI.


I AM BACK.

Island

Written by Rovelae

Things should be going back to normal, now that Joker's finally back with his family after the nightmarish killing game. But DICE's supreme leader is far from all right, and if there's one thing they can be sure of, it's that he'll never admit it.

So, DICE decide to take drastic measures.

WHEN DICE GETS their Supreme Leader back— when the nightmarish killing game broadcast is shut down, when the Remnants of Despair behind the copycat crime are captured, when the Future Foundation decides the captured Ultimates are physically recovered from their time in the virtual reality— when Joker comes home to his DICE, it's like he never left.

For a few hours, that is.

They celebrate, with brimming enthusiasm from Joker and cautious optimism from the others, by painting a suitably obnoxious mural right smack in the middle of main street. They raid the mostly-burnt-out home decorating store a few blocks down for supplies, and they replace the Remnants' *DEATH IS ALL THAT'S LEFT* with their own *HOPE ALWAYS WINS.* They talk, and they make jokes, and they laugh like the killing game was just a bad dream. Like the Tragedy itself hadn't happened. Like everything's okay.

Joker's been unusually quiet, though. That's not technically a problem; sometimes he just gets like that— but when they look over to see him staring blankly at the wall, unresponsive, clutching a can of pink spray paint to his chest, a flicker of unease creeps into the group.

"Hey, Boss?" Hearts says, tentatively reaching out to touch his shoulder. "You in there?"

He jolts at the contact, blinking like he's coming out of a trance, and laughs. "Sorry, sorry, I got distracted! What did you say?"

"Do you want me to do our logo instead?" Queen asks. "You seem a little…."

"Yeah, go ahead and put it here." Joker indicates the wall and steps back a little. "Guess I breathed in too much of the fumes," he adds, shaking the paint can.

"You haven't opened it yet," Spades points out.

Joker ignores him. "Hey, hey, let's wrap this up quickly, 'kay? I'm in the mood for some of Dimples' hot cocoa!"

Dimples claps his hands in agreement, and the conversation is all but forgotten.

* * *

Things don't go back to normal, though.

The next few days redefine the phrase *walking on eggshells.* Joker puts up a front, of course— he's always been good at that— but as it happens, DICE have always been good at sifting through his lies.

That's how they're able to notice the way he keeps a wall to his back whenever possible, and the times when his expression slips to blank and he stares too far into the distance, and how he has to be reminded to eat even with food in front of him. That's how they know that, despite the wide, bright grin on his face, he's more hurt than they've ever seen him.

Joker, predictably, denies everything.

"It's not the end of the world, you know," he tells Bishop and Ace the night they sneak into the local children's hospital with enough balloons to make it look like a carnival. "I'm alive. To me, everything that happened was just a bad dream. Things don't have to change."

"Things did change," Ace points out as Joker finishes twisting a long yellow balloon into the shape of a horse. "Joker, you *died*."

"But then I didn't. So, it works out."

"We're just *saying*," Bishop sighs, "you're clearly not yourself, and— *don't*, you'll wake them up—"

Joker raises an eyebrow over an otherwise blank expression, pinching the end of the balloon to let out some of the air in an obnoxiously loud *fweeee*.

"You done?" he asks as he ties it off, and Bishop rolls his eyes.

"We're just trying to help, Boss."

"Then quit worrying." He stretches the balloon horse out to bump against Bishop's nose. "Ne-eigh! Why the long face, Bishop?"

Bishop swats it away with a scowl, and Joker snickers.

Ace stretches out to catch the balloon before it hits the ground. "Joker, just tell me one thing," he says. "What do you gain from bottling everything up like this?"

Joker gives him a wry smile, unconsciously reaching up to his collar to grasp at a scarf that isn't there, that he hasn't worn since the killing game. "It's more about what I might lose if I start talking."

* * *

It's after the second week of Joker's bizarre behavior that DICE decides they've had enough.

Queen slips a couple of melatonin tablets into Joker's drink during teatime, and as soon as he keels over at the kitchen table, Spades calls the others into the living room, slapping a poster paper crowded with diagrams onto the coffee table.

"Operation Island," it reads.

"Like, 'no man is an island,'" Spades explains. "It'll make sense. Keep reading."

DICE takes a moment to mull it over.

It's drastic, Queen points out.

He's going to hate it, Jack observes.

There's a chance it could make everything worse, Spades admits.

They glance over to their leader, at the pallor in his complexion, the way he twitches and mutters in his sleep, struggling against the demons only he can see.

It might just be the best chance they have, Hearts says.

* * *

It takes a whole month before Operation Island is ready. In the meantime, they do the best they can.

Joker's good at keeping himself distracted. A little too good, in fact, going by the way his heists and excursions become louder, more daring, more frequent, even as the shadows under his eyes deepen. All DICE has to do is come up with excuses for why the toolbox has gone missing, or why someone took too long on a supply run. Keep him from asking the questions they know he would ask if he were… well. Getting enough sleep, eating normally, and not jumping at the slightest unexpected sound.

When the month is up, Joker looks worse than ever, not that he'd ever admit it. They corner him in the kitchen, forming a semicircle around him as he's slamming down another quadruple-shot of espresso, and he grins at them over the rim of the mug, opening his mouth to say something, but stops short when he realizes he's surrounded. His expression blanks, and he scans over them like he's looking for a way to run.

"…What are you doing."

Hearts flashes a disarming smile. "Do you trust us, Boss?" she asks.

"Sure I do." Joker returns the smile readily, but his is pressed thin, belying the certainty he'd woven so expertly into his voice.

“Good,” Hearts says anyway, and holds up a thick strip of dark cloth. “Then tie this over your eyes.”

When he doesn’t take it from her, she places it in his hands herself. Joker stares at it like he’s expecting it to come to life and bite him. “Do… what?”

“Is the sleep deprivation finally getting to you?” Hearts giggles. “Nothing bad’s going to happen, I promise. It’s just us.”

Slowly, mechanically, Joker raises the blindfold to his eyes.

“Make sure you really can’t see anything,” Spades tells him as he ties it. “No cheating.”

“I really can’t s— *Ace*, put me *down!*” Joker’s fists thump uselessly against Ace’s back as the tallest of the gang slings him over his shoulder. “Where are you taking me? Guys, I don’t like this—”

“It’ll be okay, Boss, we promise!” Jack says. Dimples pats Joker’s head— he’d complain that it was condescending if he could see— as they move to the door.

Joker protests all the way to the warehouse where they’ve hidden the “island,” ranging from his usual wailing and crocodile tears to snappy comments on how stupid and *boring* all this is. It would probably annoy DICE plenty more if they didn’t sense the undercurrent of fear in Joker’s voice, so they laugh it off, dodging his questions with promises that *It’ll all make sense soon.*

Joker goes quiet when they enter the warehouse, perhaps sensing the change in light even through the blindfold. Ace carries him toward the project they’ve spent every spare minute putting together: a circle of tall wood panels, braced against the floor so they can’t be pushed over from inside. Dimples helps Smiley drag two of the panels away from each other so there’s just enough space for Ace to squeeze through and set Joker down on the chair inside.

Joker’s pouting, but there’s a tightness in his jaw that only grows when Ace pulls Joker’s hands behind his back and clicks a pair of handcuffs over his wrists. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on now?” he says as Ace moves away.

“You’ll find out in a second.”

“That’s *extremely* worrying, Ace—”

“You’ll be fine,” Queen says for what seems like the hundredth time. “Just keep the blindfold on until we say so, okay?”

“Where are— where are you going?” Joker squirms to his feet, tugging at the handcuffs, trying in vain to fit his hands through. “Are you leaving?”

“We’re still here,” Hearts assures him. “Don’t move, you’ll trip. We’ll just be on the other side—”

“The other side of what?” Joker yells. He brings a knee up to his chest to step over the handcuff chain, then promptly loses his balance when he collides with the chair, knocking it and himself to the ground.

“Told you,” Hearts mutters. “Are you okay? Did you hit your head?”

“No,” comes the groan of a reply.

“No to which one?”

“I didn’t hit my head.”

She sighs in relief, and glances toward Smiley and Ace as they push the panel of the wall back into place. Smiley gives her a thumbs-up once everything’s in position.

“Okay, you can look now.”

Joker shifts his other leg over the cuffs until both hands are in front of him, then sits up as he pulls off the blindfold.

“What the….”

From Joker’s position, the circle of panels forms a small room without a ceiling, furnished with a central table, a few crates, and a couple of storage shelves. An assortment of nonsensical trinkets and knickknacks are crowded anywhere there’s room to set them down— a row of empty glass bottles here, a kangaroo statuette there— the same sort of organized chaos that usually fills Joker’s room at home.

Joker looks… put at ease by it, in fact.

“Are you guys still here?” he asks.

“We’re behind the walls,” Bishop says, and Dimples knocks on the wood to prove it. “There’s a door, too, see?”

Joker hums his acknowledgement, glancing each wall up and down. “Where did you find all this?”

“It’s cool, isn’t it?” Jack says. “We’ve been scavenging a lot. Took us a while to set up.”

Joker crosses to the table in the middle of the room and picks up the coded message lying on top. “Is it… a game?”

“Yeah, it’s an escape room,” Queen says. “To get out, you have to either find the key to the door or say the password. Wanna play?”

“I….” Joker turns around, taking it all in again. “Guys, it looks amazing, but I….”

“Please?” Princess adds the tiniest thread of disappointment to the word, with puppy-dog eyes that would melt a heart of stone. “We worked really hard on it.”

It’s arguably a dirty tactic— painting Joker as the bad guy if he refuses— but it’s also his weakness and she knows it.

“Sure!” Joker says immediately, grinning ear to ear. “But it’s kind of going to suck when I get out in five minutes.”

“We’ll see about that,” Bishop snickers. “Time starts now.”

As expected, Joker blazes through the first few puzzles with scarcely a pause. He’s in his element, cracking ciphers with scarcely more than a glance, finding hidden tools as quickly as if he’d known where they were all along. He attacks each new obstacle with a single-minded focus, but behind it there’s an excitement about him that they haven’t seen in a long time.

He even laughs a little when he finds the clue hidden behind the framed photo of a rubber duck on the wall— the first real laugh they’ve heard since before the Remnants had taken him.

But in a game rigged against him, there’s only so far Joker can get.

He spends a good ten minutes examining one of Jack’s particularly annoying contraptions, a box with two holes on opposite sides. He’d need to pull a lever in each hole at the same time to unlock it, and the chain on his handcuffs was barely too short to allow it.

Joker abandons the box with a grumble and moves to the lock on the exit door again. He finds the two bobby pins taped to the underside of the handle and bends them into a lockpick set, but soon finds the deadbolt on the door too heavy for the flimsy pins to budge. He mumbles a “Really, guys?” and turns the lockpick on the handcuffs instead, but his frown deepens within seconds. “Did you do what I think you did?”

“You’re playing on ‘mean’ difficulty,” Bishop says through one of the gaps in the walls. “Giving up so soon?”

Joker throws the lockpick at the wall and scans over the room again as the others snicker, just out of sight.

It’s clear Joker’s reached a dead end, though. He reads and rereads the clues he’s found already, then grits his teeth and sets the papers down with a huff, moving to inspect Jack’s box again. He doesn’t have any luck with it this time, either, so he switches to pacing the perimeter of the room instead, investigating every nook and cranny for anything he could have possibly missed.

He finally stops in front of the exit door and knocks sharply. “It’s a really cool game,” he says, “and you all did a great job, but it’s broken. Can I come out now?”

“It’s not broken,” Ace says. “We each gave it a test run. Everything’s working how it’s meant to.”

“It’s *not*,” Joker snaps. “You’ve made it impossible to win. Let me out.”

“Sorry, but we can’t,” Queen says. “You have to find the key or say the password.”

“I just said it’s—” Joker breaks off suddenly, returning to the table and pressing both palms flat against its surface. “This isn’t funny.”

“It’s not meant to be,” Spades says.

“There’s no way out.”

“There’s always a way out, Boss.”

“No.” Joker rears up at that, bristling. “The exit key has to be in the crate, which I need the crowbar to open. To get the crowbar, I have to put the last gear in the conveyor system here, but to get the last gear, I need to open *this* thing, which I need both hands free to do. Which is impossible, since the handcuffs are *superglued shut*. There’s *no way out.*”

DICE remains silent for a time, letting his words sink in. Bishop clears his throat. “We have bolt cutters out here—”

“Oh, *come on!*” Joker tangles his fingers in his hair and lets out a cry of frustration. “Do you want something out of this?” he shouts. “Is that it?”

“We want you to understand something, Boss.”

Joker’s hands slide down to cover his face, and he backs away from the door, his breath catching. “This is about them, isn’t it,” he mutters. “Miu and… and Gonta.”

“This is about you, Joker,” Ace says, as gently as he can manage. “We’re not worried about anything else right now.”

“You— I don’t— they—” Joker’s pacing takes him to the wall opposite the exit, and he presses his back against it, sliding down into a sitting position. “I-I just….”

“Joker?” Smiley calls. “Kokichi. Take a deep breath.”

Joker, surprisingly, complies, bowing his head.

“Stay with us, okay? You’re safe. We’re right here.”

“Were you watching when I killed them?” Kokichi asks.

DICE tries unsuccessfully not to flinch. Ah, here it is. The conversation none of them are looking forward to, but all of them know they need to have.

“I didn’t want you to see,” Kokichi continues, chewing his thumbnail. “I never wanted you to see. If there was the slightest chance you were real… you deserved better than that stupid game.”

“So did you,” Jack replies without missing a beat.

Kokichi lets out a dry laugh. “Maybe once.”

“Stop that,” Hearts says. “This wasn’t meant to make things worse for you. We don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know,” Kokichi mumbles. He rests his chin on his knees, staring at the floor. “What *do* you want?”

“That’s what you’re here to figure out,” Ace says. “That’s the meaning behind this room.”

Kokichi hums, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Never was any good with elaborate metaphors.”

Princess peeks through the gaps in the wood panels. “What do *you* want, Boss?” she asks.

Kokichi chews on the words for a while. The chains on his handcuffs clink lightly when he hugs his legs closer to his chest. “I wanted to stop it,” he says. “And not just for the people trapped in there with me. I knew our deaths wouldn’t be enough for whoever was watching— not if they’d put that much time, energy, and resources into a *killing game*.” He spits the last words out like they leave a bad taste in his mouth. “As soon as we died, they’d find more Ultimates, and force more kids to kill each other. I promised myself I’d do anything— *sacrifice anything* to save them, but….”

“But it wasn’t that simple, was it?” Queen says.

“They made me— they gave me that *video* of you,” Joker says, scowling as he rubs tears from his cheeks. “And that made it so much worse, because I thought there was no way you could be real— and if you were—”

“Why not?” Smiley cuts in. “They can’t have erased *everything* about us.”

“Because *I don’t get good things*,” Kokichi practically snarls, though the sudden flare of anger doesn’t seem directed at them. “Even with what they let me remember, I knew that. I’m… I’m meant to be alone. To love things that don’t love me back.”

“That’s not *true*,” Hearts bursts out, but Joker just shakes his head.

“You were too perfect. You couldn’t possibly have been real,” he says. “And if you were actually out there…. With what I was planning to do, I… I didn’t think you’d want me back.” His voice fades to a whisper, and it’s a moment before he can finish with, “I just wanted to go home.”

It’s such a small, simple way of putting it, but it seems to perfectly sum up how all of the killing game participants must have felt. They may have been Ultimates, but they were still *children*— children whose biggest worries should have been getting a drivers’ license or asking their crush to prom, not wondering whether they’d live to see the morning. Kokichi’s life had been taken from him in too many ways, and DICE knew he’d never be the same because of it.

They’d known that since the night they’d watched their leader pull the pin on an electrobomb, two crossbow bolts protruding from his body and dyeing his white jacket a dark, vindictive red. They’d known the moment the broadcast came back online to show the unthinkably horrific murder scene in the hangar. Maybe what had happened to Kokichi wasn’t *real* in DICE’s sense of the word, but Ouma Kokichi’s reality was that he’d died, alone and scared and in pain.

Silence reigns throughout the warehouse.

“Hey, Kokichi?” Princess speaks up at last. “You’re kind of dumb sometimes. I mean, you’re not *really* dumb, but… you know. You act like it.”

Kokichi makes a little scoffing noise that might be an admission of agreement.

“You did a lot of bad things in there,” Princess continues. “But you only did them because you wanted to help, right? Even if it didn’t work out the way you wanted it to… I don’t think that makes you a bad person. You’re still my big brother, and I still love you.” She bites her lip. “I forgive you, okay?”

“You *shouldn’t*.”

“Well, I do.” She pauses to read what Dimples is signing to her. “And Dimples does, too.”

“So do I,” Spades says, and Jack hums his agreement.

“We all do,” Queen says. “So don’t carry that burden anymore. You’re still ours, and we still want you back.”

Kokichi’s shoulders tremble.

“You know we’d take this away from you in a second if we could,” Hearts says. “But it’s not that easy. You’re not going to stop feeling this way unless you forgive yourself, too.”

“I don’t need….” His voice catches. “I’m okay. I’ll… I’ll be okay.”

“Look at yourself. You’re not okay.”

Kokichi shakes his head. “I have to be—”

“No,” Ace says, “you don’t.”

Kokichi doesn’t argue this time. “I don’t know… how to….” He gestures helplessly. “How to be anything else.”

“Which is why we’re here to help you figure it out,” Bishop says. “What do you think a family’s for, Kokichi?”

Slowly, Kokichi raises his head, his lips forming the word *family* like he’s never heard it before. He tries unsuccessfully to blink back a fresh wave of tears.

“Remember what we said at the start, Kokichi?” Smiley says. “To escape, you can either find the key or say the password. Have you figured out what it is yet?”

Kokichi swallows, takes a deep breath, and lets it out in a shaky sigh.

“I… I need help.”

The door opens.

✦ ✦ ✦

"This is Hinata. How can I—"

"Hajime, *babe!*" Kokichi gushes, and all around him, his clowns snicker. "Hey, how are things at the Future Foundation? Is your refrigerator running?"

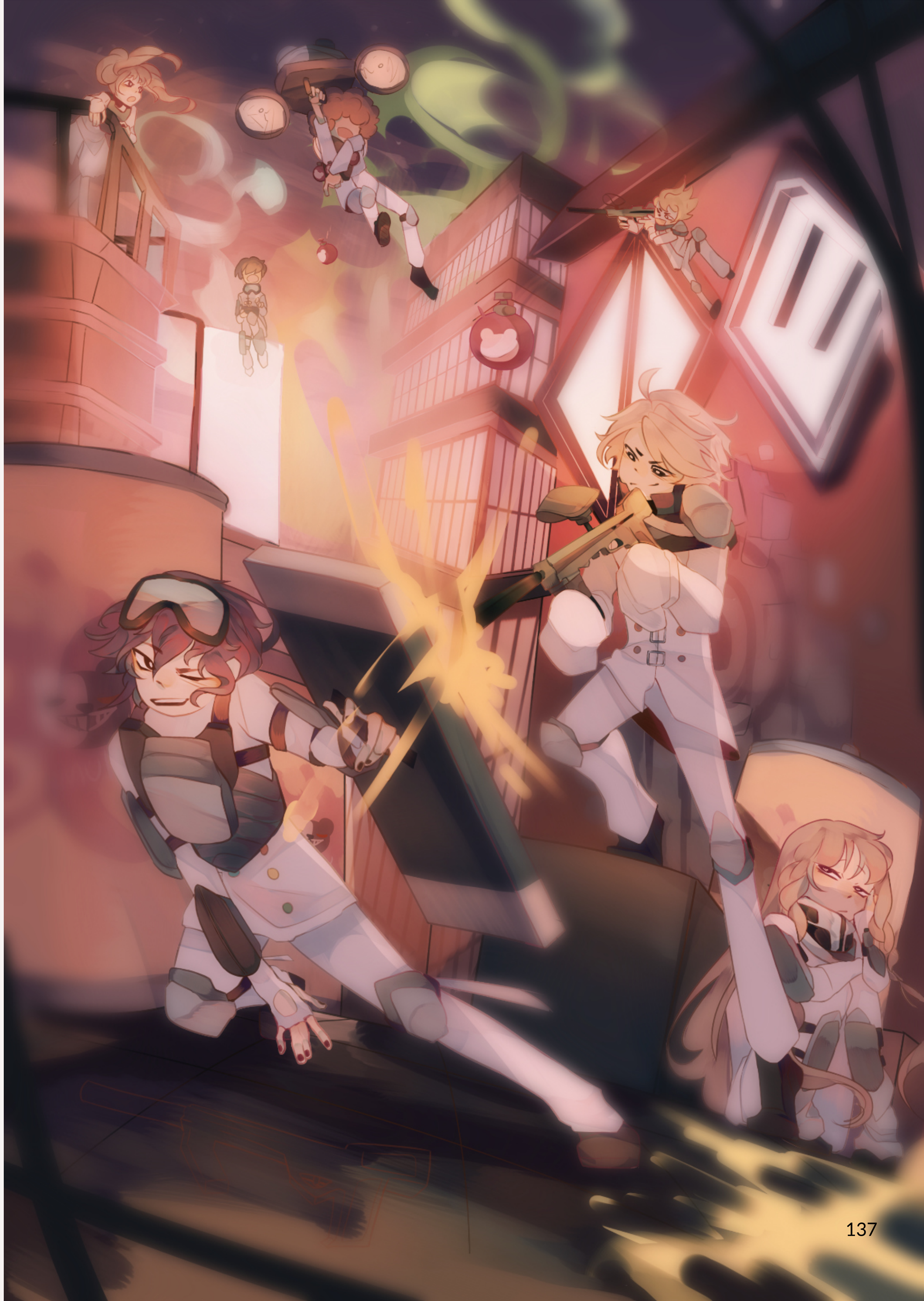
"Is my…?" Hinata sighs. *"Is this Kokichi?"*

"Aww, you remembered—"

"I'm about to hang up, so if this isn't important—"

"Wait. Don't." Kokichi drops the façade, taking a moment to ease his fingers out of the fist he'd clenched them into and tangle them in the checkered scarf around his neck instead. Hearts squeezes his other hand reassuringly, and Ace claps him lightly on the shoulder. Kokichi's family surrounds him, protects him. Loves him.

"I'd… like to take you guys up on the therapy you offered."



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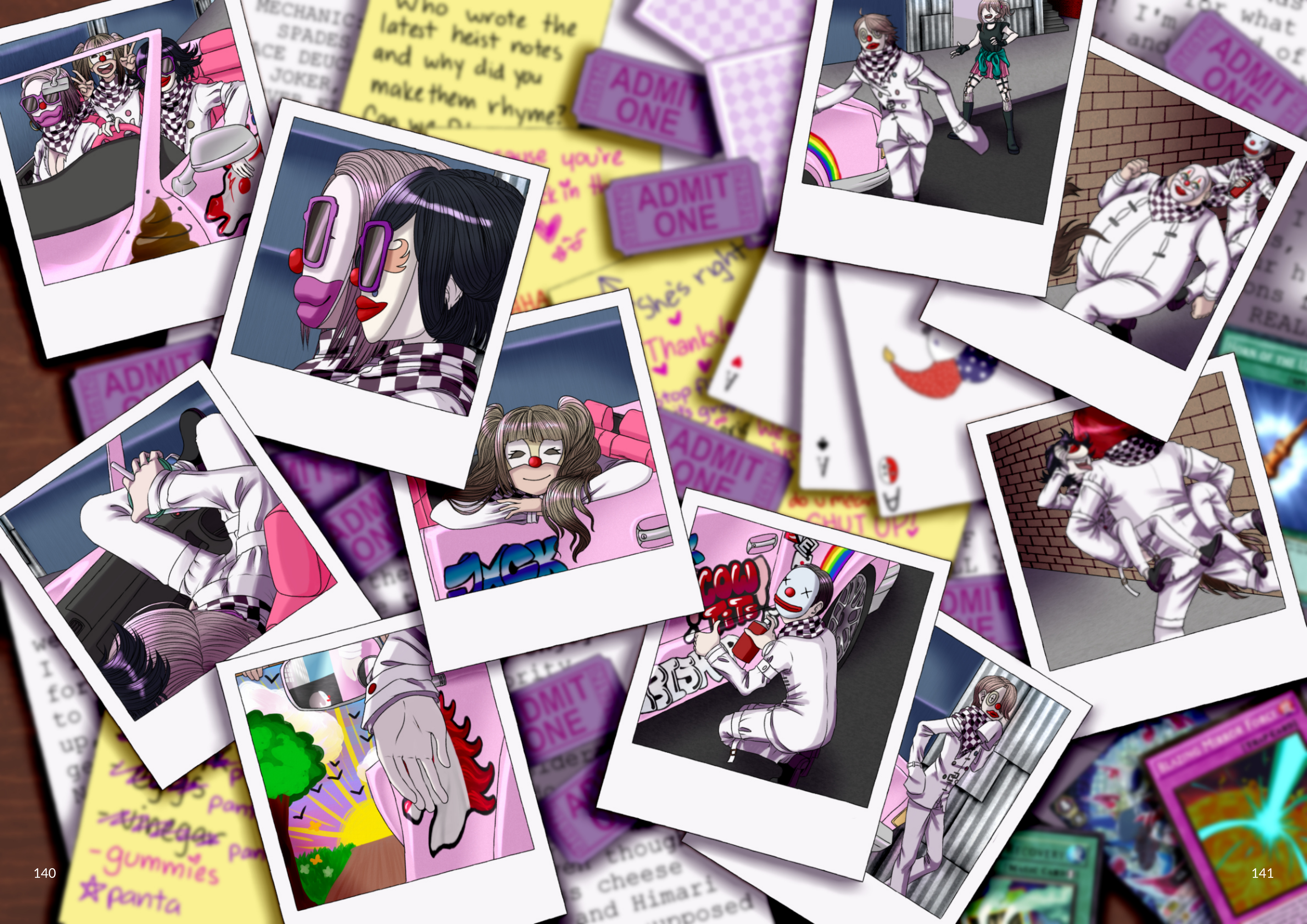

MECHANIC
SPADES
ACE DEUC
JOKER
Who wrote the latest heist notes and why did you make them rhyme?
ADMIT ONE
ADMIT ONE
'cause you're
HAHA
She's right
Thanks!
ADMIT ONE
JACK
ADMIT ONE
SHUT UP!
ADMIT ONE
I'm
for what
REAL
~~-eggs~~
~~-vinegar~~
-gummies
☆panta
cheese
and Himari
BLAZING MIRROR FORCE

Hello Dystopia

Written by Artemis

Ouma returns to the world of the living. DICE is here: living, breathing, *alive*, but... not.

(Same faces, different memories. They might as well not be the same people at all.)

He learns to live with them, anyway.

DANGANRONPA IS *OKAY*.

It's inescapable, sure. Unavoidable with its posters and banners and billboards meant to snare wayward gazes, blaring bright and bold on the back of buildings with its large screaming text advertising pretty pink death, pretty pink blood splattered over artfully like ink, like paint for... aesthetic. Bloody, twisted, soulless aesthetic.

So— no, it's not her thing; Himari has more self respect than that. But she's learned to bear with it. She's lived with it long enough: it's not hard to let its neon signs fade into the background.

Faces of those marching to death are like the slumped over trees at the edges of her train station. Forgotten. Gone.

Just like their souls tumbling like raindrops into the hungry machine that is Danganronpa.

But like rain through the gutters, the thoughts slide out of her mind, she slips on her boots, and she moves on.

* * *

... he awakens.

One moment he's a pancake of intestines and blood and crushed bone, and the next he's...

awake.

Alive.

He wades through the first hours of beyond virtual death like it's a dream— half-conscious, somewhat out of it, uncaring of it all.

Because how else is he supposed to feel? He'd thought he'd unraveled all the mysteries, lit the match for Saihara-chan to burn the rest of it down once he was gone: only to be blindsided by the biggest lie of them all.

He was *alive.*

It was almost kind of fitting. Of course the mastermind would have one more trick up her sleeve. Part of him would almost be amused, if he didn't feel like he was trapped in a world he never belonged to.

Well, not that it mattered. Once his vitals were fine and he wasn't on the verge of collapsing in the dining hall, Team Danganronpa spat him onto the street, like a wad of gum that's lost all its flavor, a chewy lump of manufactured plastic stuck to the bottom of some shoe heel, destined for the trash.

All he has are the clothes on his back, a key, and a note with his new address.

He follows the streets. Slinks through an alleyway. Finds his door.

He fumbles with the key for a moment, then steps into the darkness.

He does not leave for two weeks.

* * *

Himari Kaneko remembers Ouma Kokichi.

Faintly. Somewhat. Just enough. Enough to know the contours of his face and recognize him— wiry and thin and completely unassuming, he had a knack of disappearing into the shadows in the wall; he was a wallflower in every sense of the word, hovering at the edges of their class, in photos and meetings and classroom greetings.

He also did not like Danganronpa. They shared a faint solidarity in that, at least.

And his eyes. They were always unreadable to her. Well— not that she really tried, anyway.

She does not remember much else about him, to be honest. His name only comes to mind when there's a hush next to the table she's wiping down— "You saw that finale, didn't you?"

She keeps cleaning. Another voice, just as breathless. "Shuichi was so brave! Tackling the mastermind and Kiibo like that..."

"I don't think it was brave. It was stupid."

"Like Kokichi?"

Ouma Kokichi-kun? Himari takes a glass, examines it, and places it with the other glassware.

"Okay, but Kokichi knew what he was *doing*. You saw what the guy did before he was killed! Honestly, it felt like *he* fit the title of detective more than the one we got..."

"You've got that right."

They laugh together. Himari doesn't look at them, and rubs at an old smudge in the wood.

Never thought *Ouma* would join the ranks of an ex-Danganronpa participant, out of all of her former classmates. It was the one thing they had in common. There's a sting of betrayal... and then there's the curiosity.

She puts the thought aside and moves onto the next table.

* * *

He lives off food delivery for a good few weeks; the fat check he gets in the mail every month is enough to pay for it and more.

The little more should be for resocializing back into society. But his birthday was the other day, hooray, so he thinks he deserves a little more. *Another*, a little more.

That turns out to be something nice from the local convenience store, and then a small roll cake from a local cafe; he fishes out some crumpled clothes from the bottom of his clean laundry basket, tugs down at the hem, puts on his mask, and heads outside.

The air is ice in his lungs. The wind batters against his jacket. The clouds are low and dark, whistling between the high buildings of Shibuya. Even the brief respite in the convenience store isn't enough, his knuckles tight around the plastic bag as it bumps against his thigh. Ouma thinks about the cost of delivery he's saving by walking, the air his old therapist was so desperate for him to breathe, and hears the chime ring above him as he pushes the door into the cafe.

And then he stops dead in his tracks. Behind the counter, cleaning the espresso machine is...

"Hearts?"

He can practically feel the brows furrow on her face. There's a pause in her movements, but she doesn't turn around. He bites his lip, and rummages through the compartments of his memory—

"Hi... Himari-san?"

She turns around. Her eyebrows reach her hairline, gaze fixated to his, like a fishing line's been strung between them. "Ouma-kun?"

"I..."

He stares at her for a little longer. Hearts?

(*Himari?*)

His DICE subordinate and vice president?

(*His... his...?*)

She breaks eye contact, glancing over at an old poster with a floppy corner taped near the register. "I... can get you something?" It sounds like a question. She winces.

"Yeah." It takes him a moment, but he scrambles through his pockets for his phone; he fishes it out along with his QR code. He brings it up to the lazer at the register and she pokes at the screen, brows furrowed tight.

They ignore the gazes.

“You’re pretty late. Caught us just before we closed…“

“I had… other plans.”

“Hm? Errands?”

“Yup.” He holds up the plastic bag. Her brow raises up to her forehead.

“Some dessert for tonight? Is it a special occasion?”

“Yup.” He drags his tongue behind his front teeth. “It’s my birthday.”

“Oh. Ah… happy birthday, Ouma-kun.” Her smile just fails to reach the corners of her eyes. “That’s actually a pretty popular birthday cake among customers! I like it a lot, too…”

“Mhm.”

“Will you have it here? I can fetch you some nice silverware. We also have a special candle for customers celebrating their birthday—”

“I’m… taking it home, actually. Thanks anyway, though.”

“Ah. Pick up. Got it.” Her smile is wry, and she waves at him. “See you later then, Ouma-kun.”

“See you… Himari-chan.” The corners of her lips quirk up at that, and he reflects the expression on his face. He returns the wave, too, and leaves the cafe for the night.

That night, when he takes sips of the grape soju and picks at the over-whipped mocha frosting of his slowly drying roll cake, commercials rolling endlessly on his television, he thinks about the Black Forest Cake Bishop baked for all of DICE for Hearts’ birthday.

He takes another bite. The wall behind him dances with the picture on his screen.

He wraps the cake back up in plastic and slips it back into the fridge.

* * *

For a few days, Himari’s thoughts are consumed by Ouma.

To be fair— the fact that her friends keep linking her to discussion videos featuring him and that her coworkers have not shut up about him ever since he’d come that one afternoon has not helped.

Still.

She wonders how he’s doing. If he enjoyed the cake, his birthday. She wonders if he’ll return again, tell her he enjoyed it; perhaps he’ll ask for another, and how she’s been doing in the meanwhile, and…

No, it won’t happen.

And it doesn’t— not for a few days. The void he’d left in the shop is palpable: literally, with the extra traffic they’d been getting as people tried to catch glimpses of the wiry celebrity who’d dared to show his face in the shop.

No wonder Ouma doesn’t show his face.

Eventually it’s like he’d never been there. The crowd dies down, and so does her hope of seeing him again; like ships passing in the night, she supposes. Some of her is happy he’s alive, at least. Some of her wonders why’d he’d join Danganronpa in the first place: that was a question she’d stowed away for asking him next time, actually. If that ever came, of course.

She’s wedged in an alleyway behind the shop two weeks later, dragging fat trash bags into the dumpster, breathing loudly through her mouth as she tried to ignore the suffocating smell of rotting food when there’s a voice behind her—

“Hearts. Wait, no—”

Her brows furrow. She turns around, and there stands Ouma-kun, once again. A hoodie is cloaked over his head, casting shadows over his face but doing nothing to hide the weariness in his eyes and the gloss of his oily hair.

“H… Himari-san, I mean,” he corrects himself again, just a little too late.

“Ouma-kun.” All she offers him is a grunt before she heaves it over the wall and into the bin, peeling off her gloves and flinging those in, too. She glances back towards the front of the shop. “Avoiding the paparazzi?”

“Something like that.” He shuffles around on his feet, follows her gaze. “Does your shift end soon?”

“Yeah, actually.” She pulls idly at a stray strand of hair as she pulls out her low ponytail. “I’m just finishing up a trash run before clocking out. What’s up? Wanna hang out?” She glances over him. “I’m assuming you’ve cleared your schedule for tonight.”

Despite himself, Ouma cracks a wry smile. “Mhm. I’ll be here.”

“Cool.” Not cool, actually. He should at least come inside to get a drink and warm up, but she doubts he’ll take her up on the offer. Instead she ducks back into the door, clocks out, and swipes her employee card for two drinks— two warm hot chocolates, whipped cream practically spilling out of the lid.

She finds him again, same place, same posture, as if Midas had poked him in the side but the gold’s been sucked out of him instead, an ivory statue with empty eyes staring at one of the Danganronpa posters peeling behind the dumpster. She attempts to release him from the curse with a poke at his side with the hot cup, and she knows she’s successful when he barely suppresses a jump and looks back at her unamused before taking the cup.

“What was that for?” He squints down at the drink before taking a sip. The color returns to his cheeks a bit.

“Releasing you from an evil spell, of course. You should be thanking me. C’mon— it’s fucking cold. Let’s go to my place, hm?”

The expression he makes in response to that is strange, but Himari assumes it’s a positive one. “That’s fine.”

The walk back home is an uneventful one. The air is sharp as always, cut through with the steam billowing up from their disposable coffee cups full of chocolate; there’s the usual babble of humans among them as they weave effortlessly through the mass, and it’s not long before they move to a quieter district, lights buzzing on as the skies fill with reds and purples.

Himari fiddles with her jingling mass of keys before she manages to unlock her door in a whooping record of twelve seconds, and the door hisses softly as it gives in to reveal the darkness of her apartment. The light flickers on after a similar struggle.

It’s nothing special. A kitchen, a futon rolled up in the corner, a small desk with her laptop, covered in dust. There’s a bookshelf looking a little sadder now, looking more like empty stacked boxes with a few knick knacks and what books she does have to her name. A dining table sits in the middle of it all, papers and a takeout box and two empty cans strewn across its surface.

She sighs, relieved all the same, snagging her toes at the back of her shoes and tossing them aside, letting her bag fall off her shoulder and simply gesturing to the table. “Feel free to make yourself comfortable. Want something else to drink? I might have something in my fridge.”

“No, I…” His gaze glosses over the contents on her table. “Actually, do you have some grape soda?”

She swings open the fridge and peeks in. Oh, huh. She does have it. “With your hot chocolate? Well, if you say so.”

At least it’s not caffeine. Along with a leftover slice of rainbow cake she’d taken home the day before, she grabs a bottle by the neck, opens it against the counter top, and places it on a folded up napkin next to his hot chocolate before sitting next to him, popping open the clamshell with a bit of effort and stabbing the slice with a fork.

He’s watching her the entire time. His gaze is piercing, almost judgemental: she’d never describe his eyes as dull, but there’s something in the way he assesses her movements, expression far away, like he’s deciding upon his own.

She decides not to rush the guy, instead easing a chunk out of the cake slice. “So how’s it been?

Ever since you…” She bites down on the fork. “Finished Danganronpa, I guess. Are the royalties good? I guess anyone would cave for those.”

His brows furrow at that. The corners of his mouth twitch up a bit, as if he’s trying to string up a smile on his lips like laundry but it keeps falling off. “I haven’t needed to get a job yet, if that answers your question.”

“Beats trying to get into the labor force after something like that, huh?” She glances at him from the corner of her eye.

“Are you considering it yourself?” He tilts his head, and she scoffs.

“Of course not. You’d know better than anyone else.” The cake slice looks half detonated, crumbs like rubble in a heap in the clamshell. The way the cake collapses beneath the prongs of her fork is a little too satisfying. “Though it has been a while…”

He takes a swing from his bottle, something of a smile warped behind the sloshing soda. “People always change, Himari-chan. You think I’d come away from Danganronpa as the same person?”

Her face contours together. “No. No one ever does. That’s why they go in the first place.”

“You think that’s why I went?”

“Isn’t that a question I should be asking?” She shoves a forkful of cake into her mouth. Crumbs scatter on the table. “It’s not like I knew you well even before all this.”

“Hmmm.” He brings the cup of whipped cream to his face; he doesn’t look up at her, even above the peak of whipped cream touching his nose. “What were we? Nothing more than classmates, right?”

“I guess.” She frowns. “I enjoyed your company, at least… I thought you’d at least feel similar. Or am I wrong?”

He puts down his cup. “Did you watch my season?”

“You know I hate Danganronpa.”

“So that’s a no, huh?” He examines the ring shaped stain his cup leaves on the table. “Hey, Himari-chan. Did you know I was the leader of a super secret organization?”

“What?” She can’t hide the disbelief in her voice. “In— back in school, or—?”

“Does it matter?” His smile is wry and wide. “It was a very powerful organization. We had branches aaaaall over the world: in Russia, the United States, and of course, here in Japan…”

She keeps staring at him.

“But of course… all good things come to an end. There were some… complications.” He swirls his bottle of soda. “But perhaps that was for the best? We were evil, after all. Still, I tried to contact my right hand man again.”

“Is that so…?”

“Her name is Hearts.” Ouma’s gaze meets hers, suddenly, and Himari can’t help but stare back. “Do you know her?”

She feels locked in place.

“Of course not. She isn’t real.” He laughs. His eyes are thin. “Well, at least you can say I tried, right? It’s the effort that counts… or whatever.”

Ouma gets up. He takes the bottle, soda sloshing on the bottom. “Thanks for the soda, but I think I’m good for tonight. See you later, Himari-san.”

He slips out of the apartment.

A spectre.

* * *

Isolation was much nicer, anyway. It’s what he’d done in the game: what makes now any different?

Some things never change. Case in point: Ouma doesn’t call Saihara. Saihara calls him.

“How have you been doing, Ouma-kun?”

He looks down at his Switch. Pietro is thanking him for the swim goggles he’d given him. “Do you have Animal Crossing, Saihara-chan? That seems to be right up your alley.”

“Huh?”

It’s almost comforting to talk to the detective again. Disregarding the fact he’d been considering never showing his face to him again. “I think you’d be a cat villager. Droopy eyed like Punchy-chan.”

“You didn’t answer my question…” Ouma hears the concern bleeding in his voice. “It’s been… three months. The game’s been over for a while. Don’t you want to see the others?”

So optimistic. “Awww, they want to see silly old me, huh? Do you have my invitation?” He runs through the flowers. “Didn’t think they’d miss me *that* much.”

“Ouma-kun…”

“What? I’m sure Gonta-kun is delighted to see my face again, right? Bet Iruma is, too.”

Silence. Ouma only knows he hadn’t hung up because of the soft breathing behind the receiver. “So staying at home will make things better?”

“Didn’t know your title was actually that of the Super High School Level Therapist.” The screen of the Switch shuts off, and Ouma slips it back into the dock. “What do you want from me?”

Silence. Then, Saihara sighs. “I’ll call you later, Ouma-kun.”

“Bye-bye, Saihara-chan.”

Click.

* * *

For the first time in years, Himari decides to look up on what the fuck happened in Danganronpa.

Akamatsu Kaede. Amami Rantarou. Houshi Ryouma. Toujou Kirumi.

Name after name after name after name. They mean nothing to her: like drops in a bucket, cards in a stack, titles assigned to faces she can’t bother to recognize; just more bullet points in the already extensive “Characters” page.

Well. Except for…

The most surprising picture in his wiki page is the one they’ve constructed of his memory of DICE. In it, Ouma is wearing a silly costume: his weird straitjacket-esque uniform, a torn up cape, a mischievous smile behind a clown mask.

And behind him, in a similar uniform, a similar mask, and two pigtails…

Hearts.

Himari looks at the other faces. It’s been years, but…

It takes a couple minutes of digging through her closet, but she eventually finds it: her high school yearbook buried beneath a pile of old sweaters.

She falls asleep just before sunrise on her laptop with it open in her lap.

* * *

He thinks Saihara is trying to call him again, ever the stubborn protagonist, but apparently the number isn’t in his contacts.

Ouma stares as his phone rings, and rings, and rings. Eventually it stops, and a little later, a notification for his voicemail pops up. He calls voicemail, puts his phone on speaker, and places it face up next to his laptop.

“Ouma!”

He flinches. It’s Bishop’s voice.

“Hi! I haven’t heard from you since high school. Remember? We were lab partners back in chemistry.”

He stares at the phone.

“Himari-san contacted me. She thinks we should all come together— our old class. Always the leader, huh? Anyway, you should join us. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other. Alright, just call me back. Bye!”

The phone clicks. He doesn’t hear the robotic voice that drones on after; instead it’s the beating of his heart, and he only has enough presence of mind to hang up and flip over his phone.

✦ ✦ ✦

It's supposed to be a casual thing, but then Bishop suggested they do a potluck, and everyone starts losing their mind. Sure, they were never quite the closest group, but they were all part of the "will never get invited to a class reunion" social group back in high school, so this was the closest they were gonna get.

Everyday she gets a callback: Shirogane on Monday with a sashimi plate. Mizuko on Tuesday; she was going to bring homemade fried rice. Hasumi on Wednesday; he was going to bring mochi from his father's store. It becomes less of a gathering and more of a party, which is… well, she supposes there's nothing wrong with that.

But still, no callback from Ouma.

She isn't sure if she should be disappointed or unsurprised. She considers going to his place to ask him directly— but she realizes she'd never gotten the guy's address, and Hidaka, who had apparently managed to dig up his number from who knows where, couldn't find that, either.

She considers leaving him a message, like Hasumi did, but figures he doesn't want to be bothered.

The night before the gathering, Himari's buttered up her manager enough to get the cafe all to herself for the evening, and texts the rest of the group chat the address. No need for decoration, she says: but Katsura and Hyodo show up with some anyway.

It's a little strange. The shop lights up, balloons on thin colorful ribbons, bobbing as the others carry everything around. The room fills with the sound of chatter, bright and eager, as people drag around chairs and tables to tape ribbons to the walls, and the bell to the door rings with every new arrival.

Himari doesn't know how long since she's been at a party like this.

Hasumi slides up to her, looking around. "Has Ouma showed up yet?"

"You can see for yourself. I don't know if he'll come…"

"What?! Even though I left three messages for him?!"

"Hasumi-san!" She gives him a sharp look, but his expression is anything but guilty.

"I thought I could pressure him into it. It's not every day we have a class reunion, and Danganronpa star or not, he shouldn't be left out."

"I guess." Himari exhales. "But what if he wants to be left out?"

He shrugs instead of answering her. She rolls her eyes, and he simply laughs as he steps away and slips back into the crowd.

Their cake hasn't arrived yet. Himari excuses herself to step outside to call them back, and the moment she slips into the silence of the street and pulls out her phone, she sees a figure— hovering close, but not daring to get near. His gaze is fixed to the shop.

"Ouma-kun?"

He slowly turns to her at the sound of her voice; his eyes are glossy. Has he been crying? "Hearts?"

She decides not to correct him, and steps closer. "Hey… you alright? Are you not coming in?"

He doesn't answer. Instead his eyes flicker over to the window, where the hum of the others' voices buzzes quietly. She follows his gaze.

Himari doesn't know why she does it, but her hand extends towards him.

"Ouma-kun."

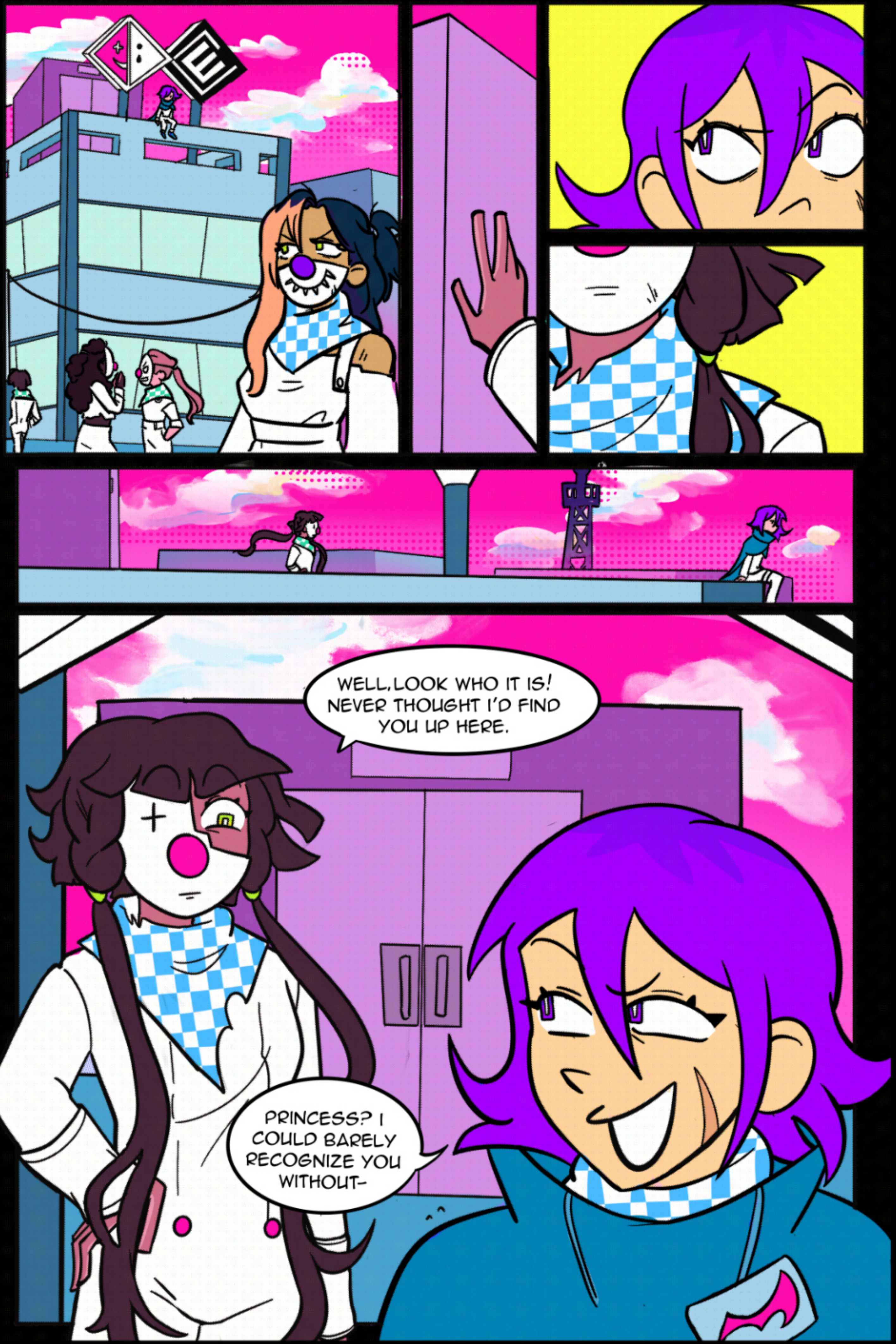
He turns towards her. He looks up at her. And for the first time, she sees him again: Ouma Kokichi, the quiet wallflower in their class.

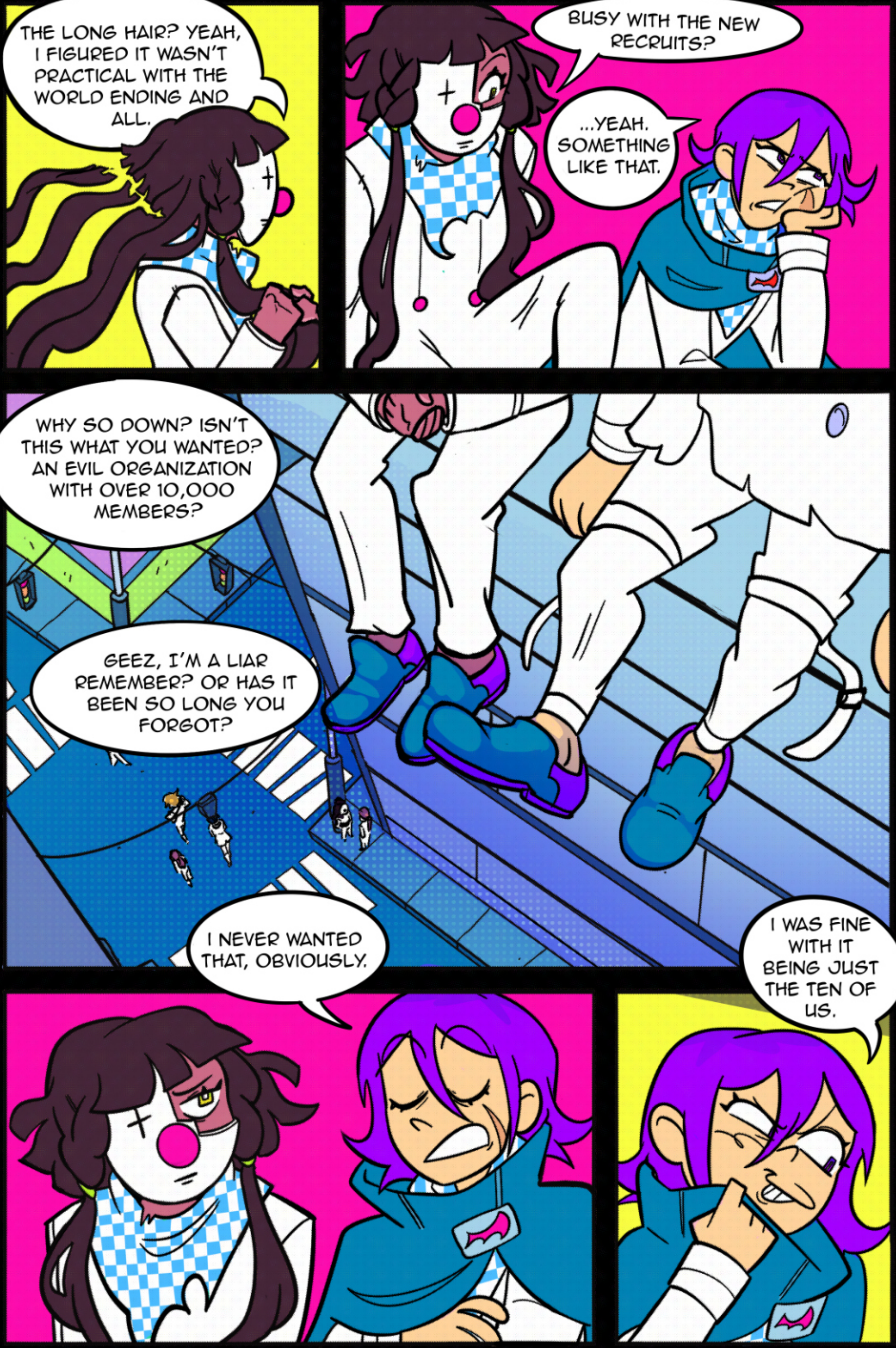
"Come on. Let's go inside. Everyone's waiting for you."

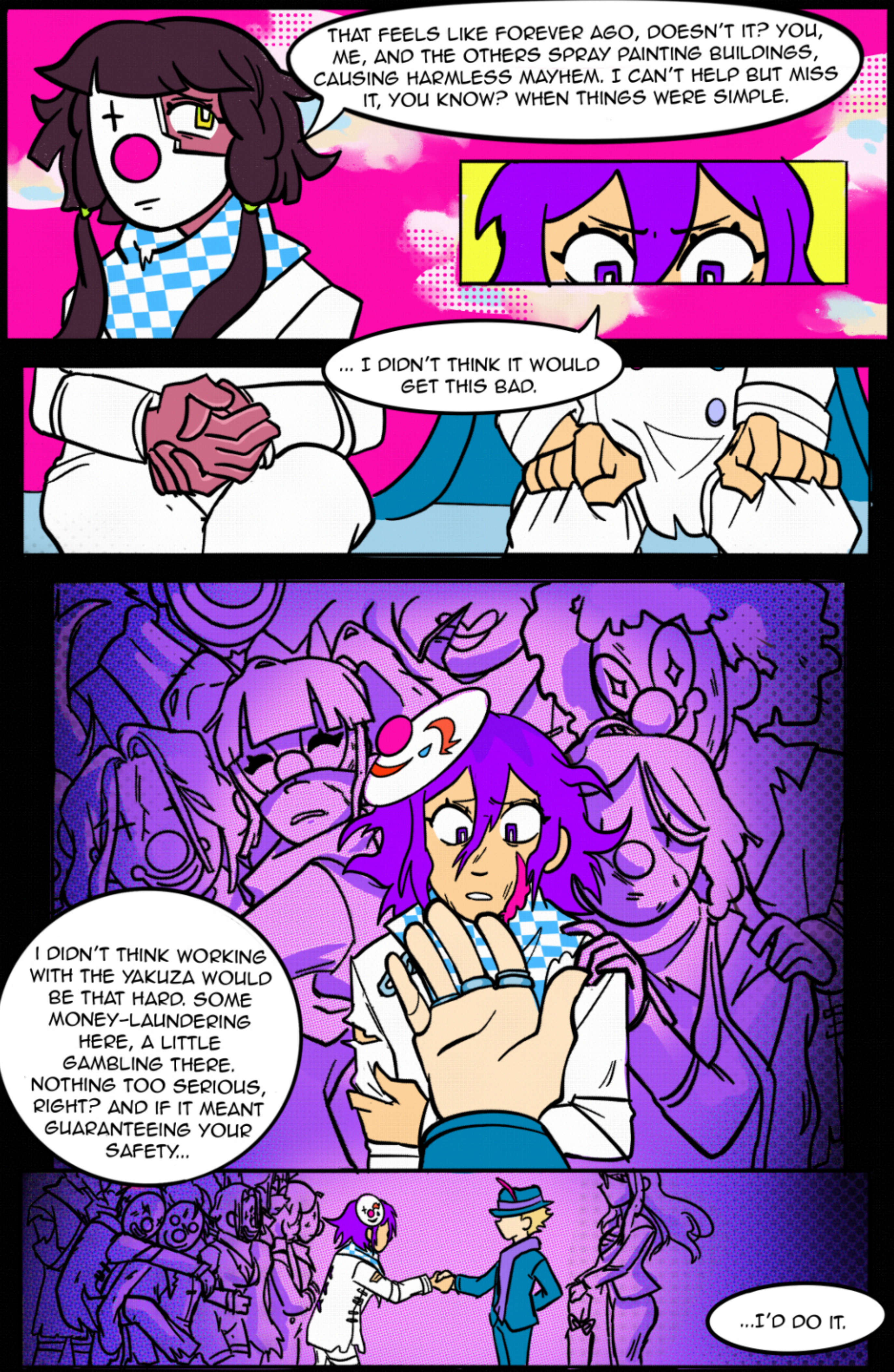
For the first time, she can read his expression. There's a quiet plea in his eyes. Something resolves in her heart, and she takes his hand, firmly grasping it in her own.

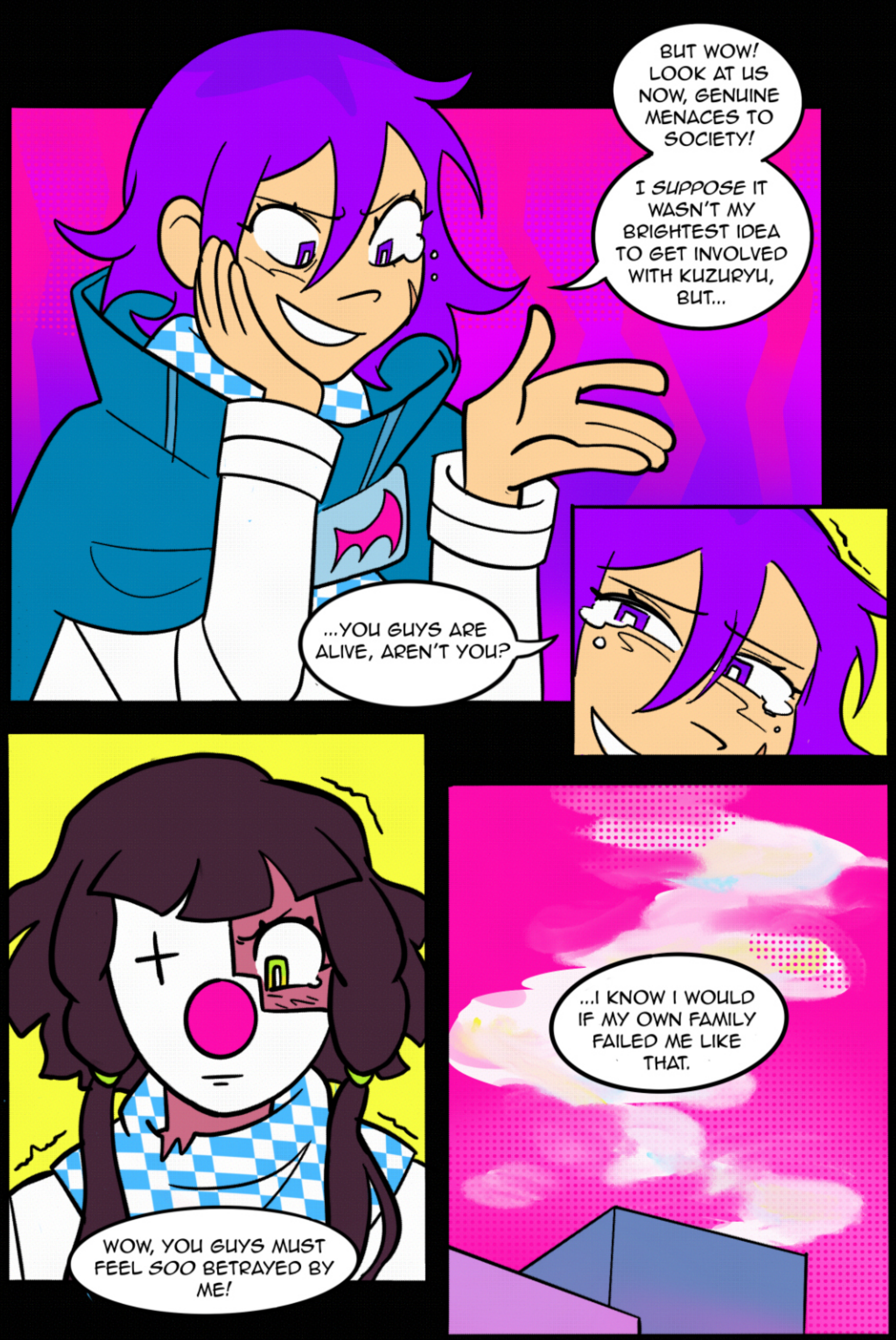
It's cold, and small, and bony. It freezes, for a moment, then relaxes. He does not meet her eyes, but his fingers curl back around hers— and that is enough. She squeezes it once, and smiles.

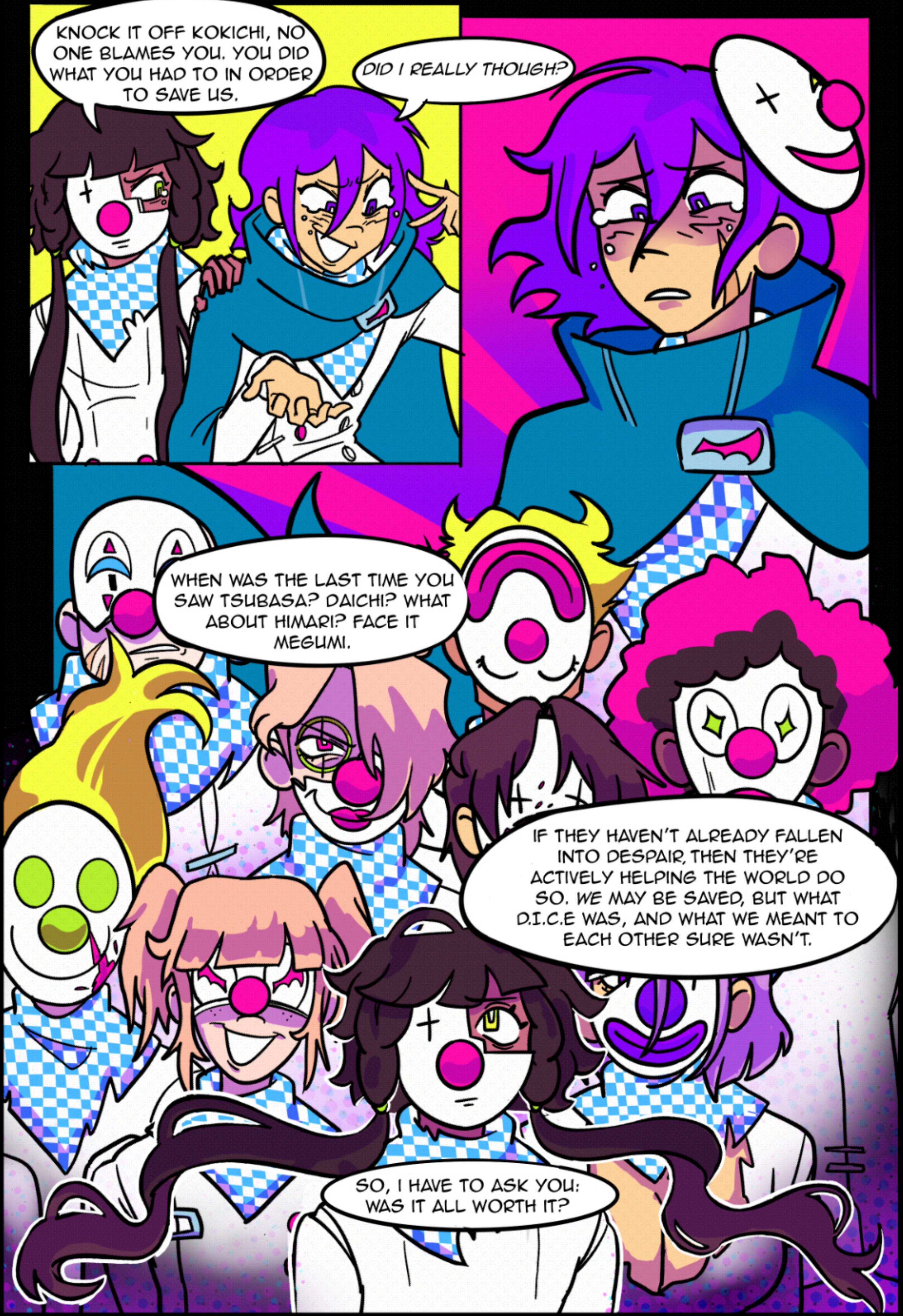
"Come on. Let's go inside."

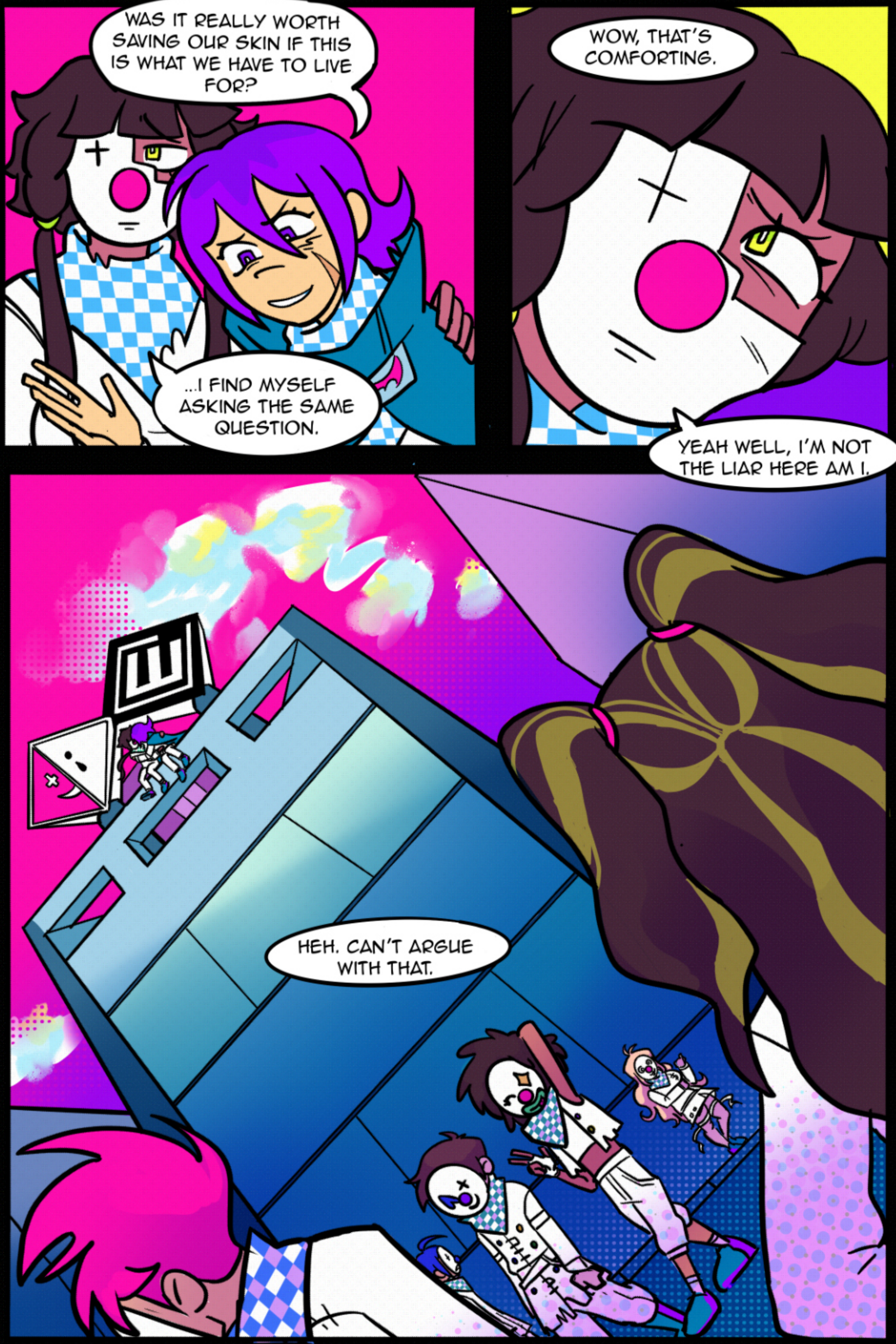

WELL,LOOK WHO IT IS! NEVER THOUGHT I'D FIND YOU UP HERE.
PRINCESS? I COULD BARELY RECOGNIZE YOU WITHOUT-

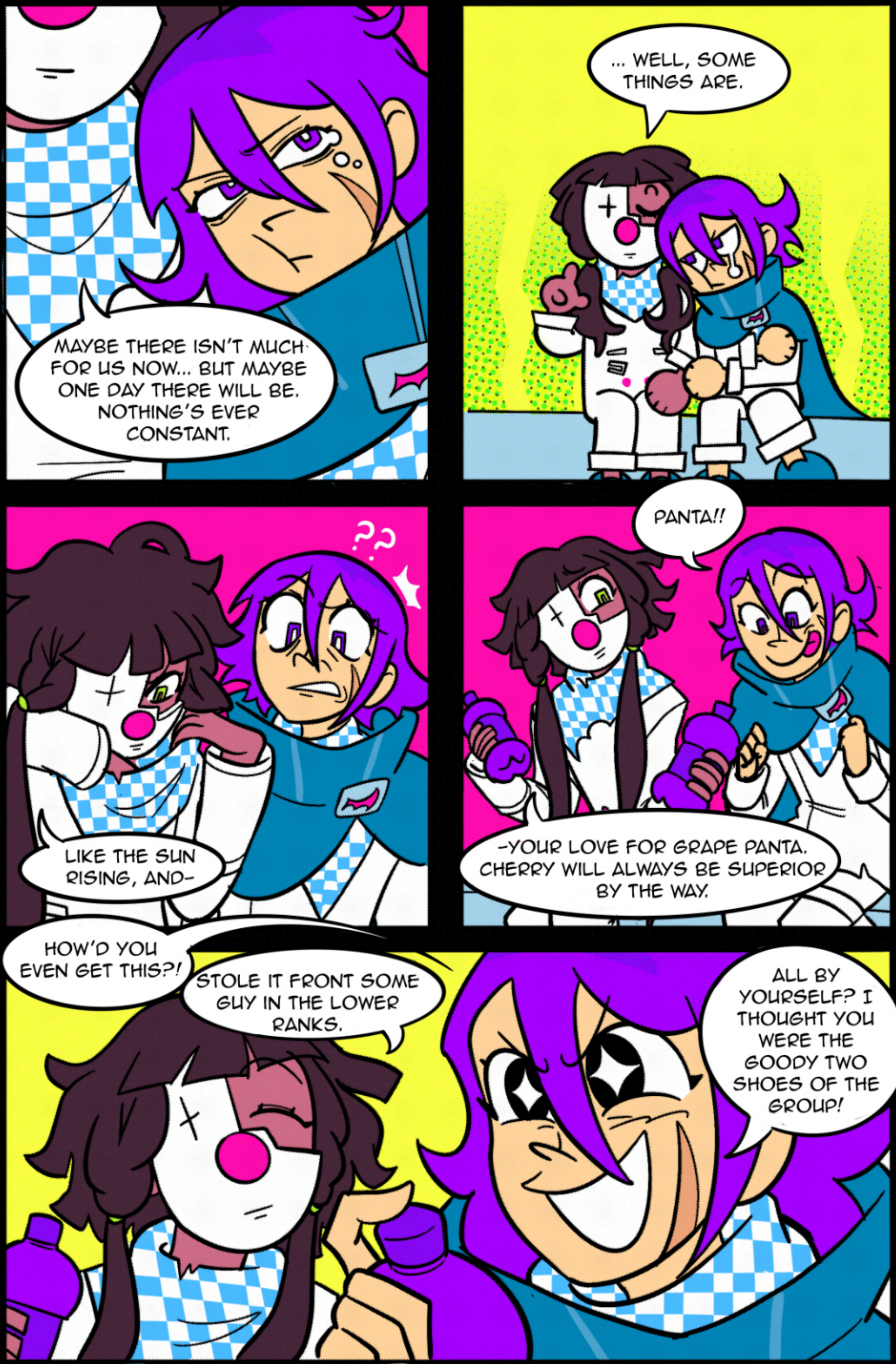

THE LONG HAIR? YEAH, I FIGURED IT WASN'T PRACTICAL WITH THE WORLD ENDING AND ALL.
BUSY WITH THE NEW RECRUITS?
...YEAH. SOMETHING LIKE THAT.
WHY SO DOWN? ISN'T THIS WHAT YOU WANTED? AN EVIL ORGANIZATION WITH OVER 10,000 MEMBERS?
GEEZ, I'M A LIAR REMEMBER? OR HAS IT BEEN SO LONG YOU FORGOT?
I NEVER WANTED THAT, OBVIOUSLY.
I WAS FINE WITH IT BEING JUST THE TEN OF US.

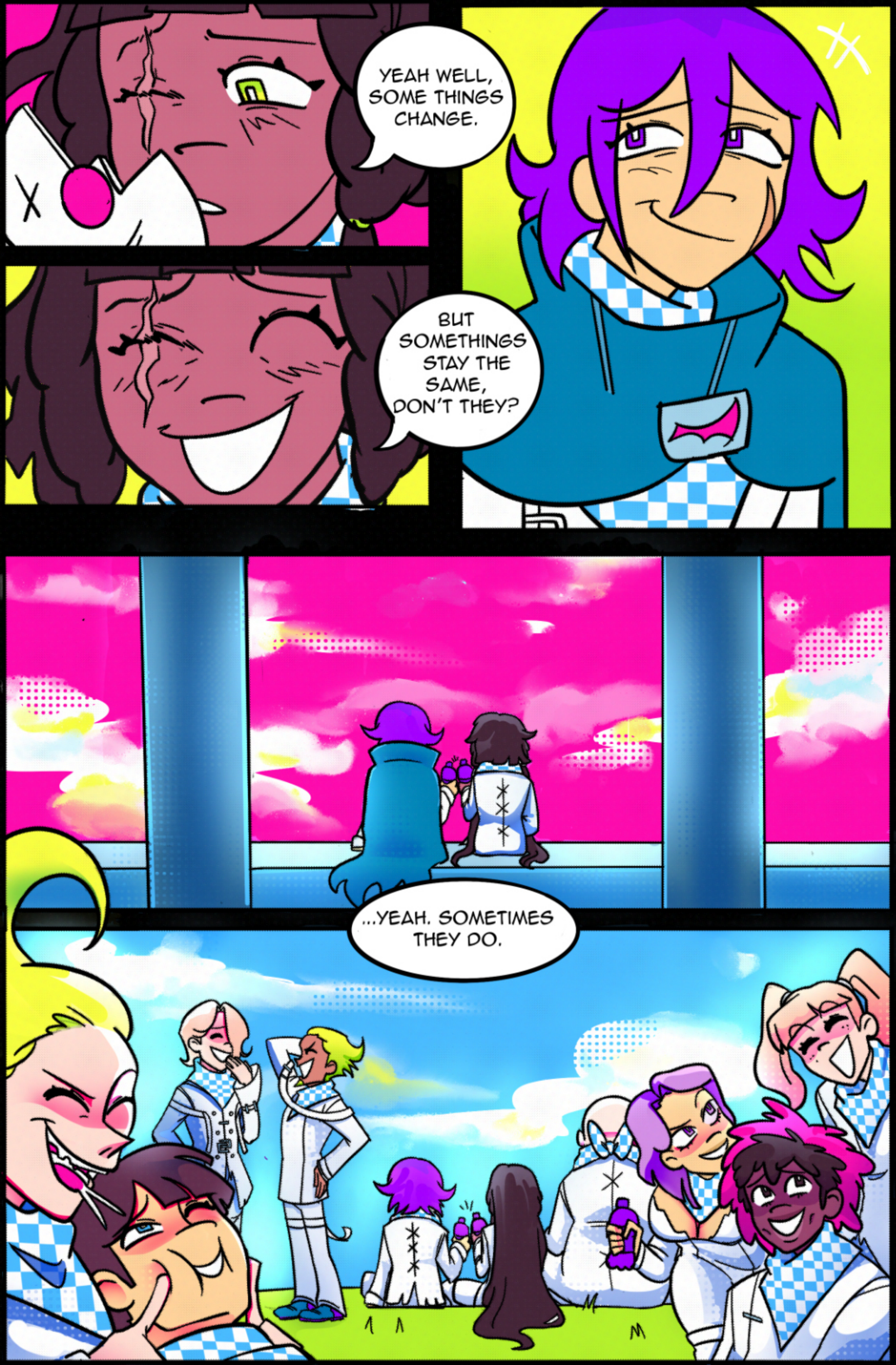

THAT FEELS LIKE FOREVER AGO, DOESN'T IT? YOU, ME, AND THE OTHERS SPRAY PAINTING BUILDINGS, CAUSING HARMLESS MAYHEM. I CAN'T HELP BUT MISS IT, YOU KNOW? WHEN THINGS WERE SIMPLE.
... I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD GET THIS BAD.
I DIDN'T THINK WORKING WITH THE YAKUZA WOULD BE THAT HARD. SOME MONEY-LAUNDERING HERE, A LITTLE GAMBLING THERE. NOTHING TOO SERIOUS, RIGHT? AND IF IT MEANT GUARANTEEING YOUR SAFETY...
...I'D DO IT.

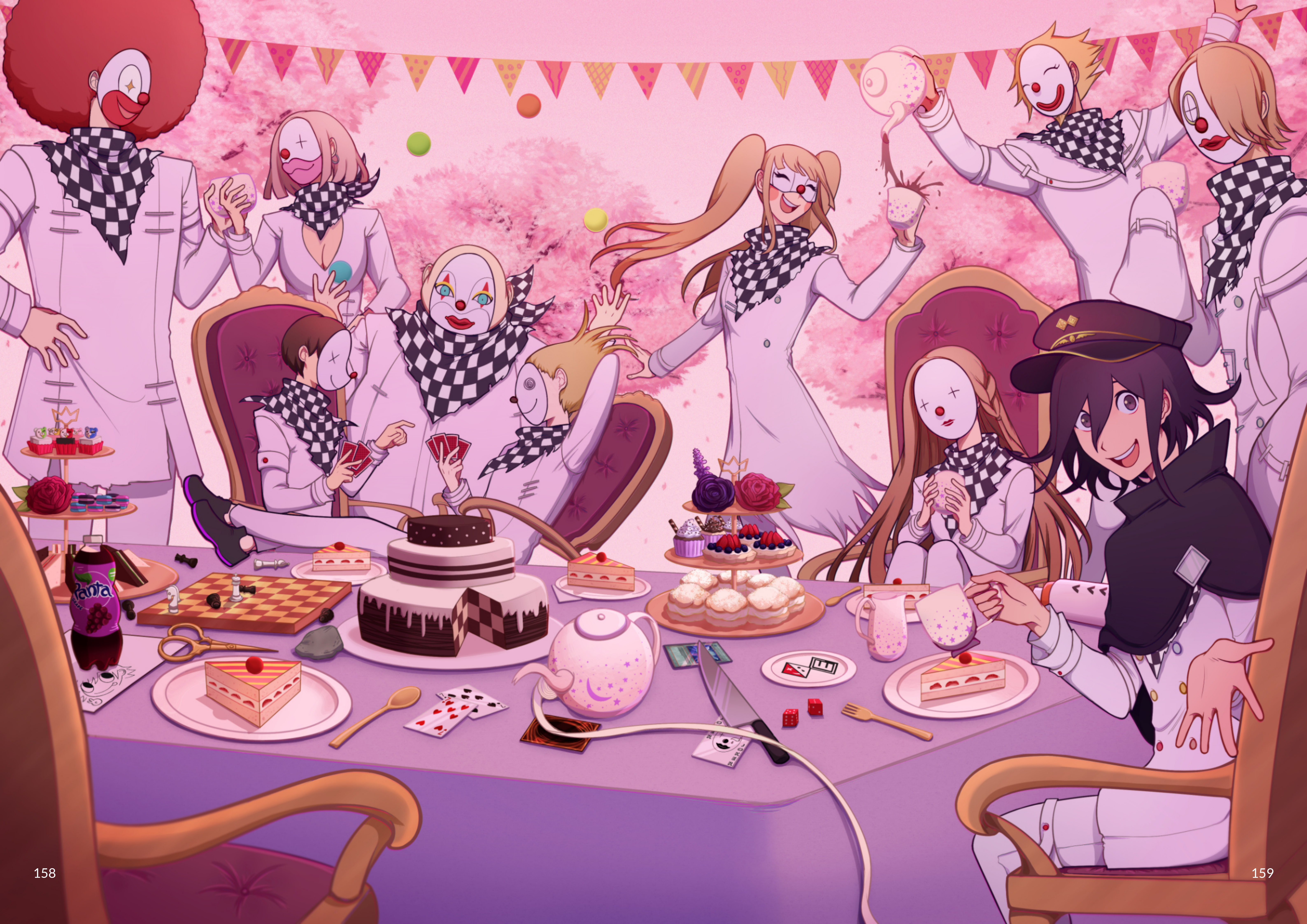

BUT WOW! LOOK AT US NOW, GENUINE MENACES TO SOCIETY!
I *SUPPOSE* IT WASN'T MY BRIGHTEST IDEA TO GET INVOLVED WITH KUZURYU, BUT...
...YOU GUYS ARE ALIVE, AREN'T YOU?
WOW, YOU GUYS MUST FEEL *SOO* BETRAYED BY ME!
...I KNOW I WOULD IF MY OWN FAMILY FAILED ME LIKE THAT.


KNOCK IT OFF KOKICHI, NO ONE BLAMES YOU. YOU DID WHAT YOU HAD TO IN ORDER TO SAVE US.
DID I REALLY THOUGH?
WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW TSUBASA? DAICHI? WHAT ABOUT HIMARI? FACE IT MEGUMI.
IF THEY HAVEN'T ALREADY FALLEN INTO DESPAIR, THEN THEY'RE ACTIVELY HELPING THE WORLD DO SO. WE MAY BE SAVED, BUT WHAT D.I.C.E WAS, AND WHAT WE MEANT TO EACH OTHER SURE WASN'T.
SO, I HAVE TO ASK YOU: WAS IT ALL WORTH IT?


WAS IT REALLY WORTH SAVING OUR SKIN IF THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE TO LIVE FOR?
...I FIND MYSELF ASKING THE SAME QUESTION.
WOW, THAT'S COMFORTING.
YEAH WELL, I'M NOT THE LIAR HERE AM I.
HEH. CAN'T ARGUE WITH THAT.


MAYBE THERE ISN'T MUCH FOR US NOW... BUT MAYBE ONE DAY THERE WILL BE. NOTHING'S EVER CONSTANT.
... WELL, SOME THINGS ARE.
??
LIKE THE SUN RISING, AND-
PANTA!!
-YOUR LOVE FOR GRAPE PANTA. CHERRY WILL ALWAYS BE SUPERIOR BY THE WAY.
HOW'D YOU EVEN GET THIS?!
STOLE IT FRONT SOME GUY IN THE LOWER RANKS.
ALL BY YOURSELF? I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE GOODY TWO SHOES OF THE GROUP!


YEAH WELL, SOME THINGS CHANGE.
BUT SOMETHINGS STAY THE SAME, DON'T THEY?
...YEAH. SOMETIMES THEY DO.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